魔法科高校の劣等生18

師族会議編〈中〉

The irregular at magic high school

佐島勤
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魔法科高校の劣等生
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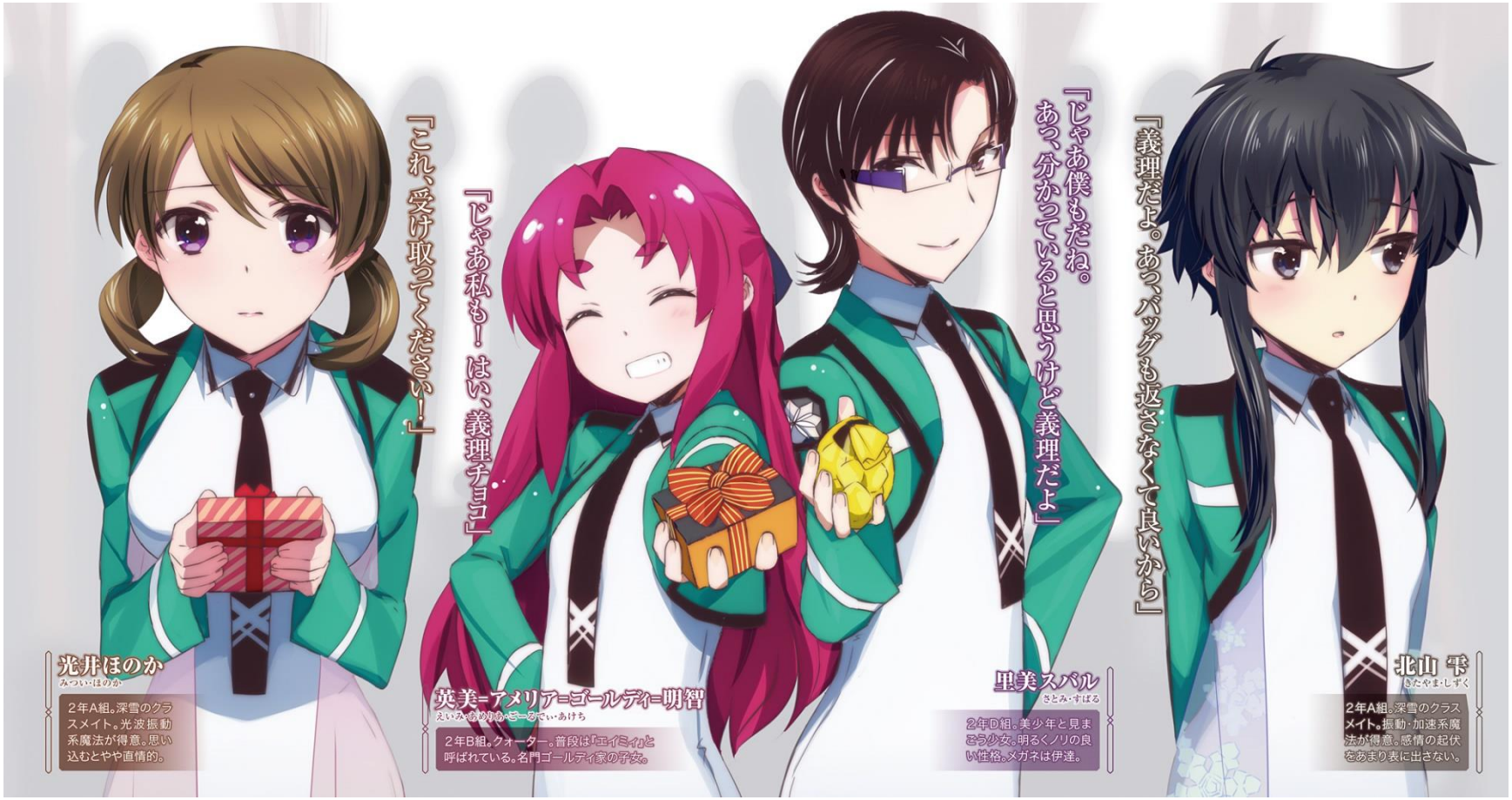
「第三高校の一条将輝です。
この度は第一高校の皆様のご厚情により、
一緒に学ばせていただくことになりました。
一ヶ月の短い期間ですが、よろしくお願いします」
一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき
第三高校の二年生。九校戦に二年連続で出場した、十師族・一条家の次期当主。深雪へ正式に婚約を申し込んだ。
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
達也の妹。第一高校2年A組所属。生徒会会長を務める優等生。冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する「重度のブラコン」。


「義理だよ。あっ、バッグも返さなくて良いから」
「じゃあ僕もだね。あっ、分かっていると思うけど義理だよ」
「じゃあ私も！　はい、義理チョコ」
「これ、受け取ってください！」
北山 雫
きたやま・しずく
2年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。振動・加速系魔法が得意。感情の起伏をあまり表に出さない。
里美スバル
さとみ・すばる
2年D組。美少年と見まごう少女。明るくノリの良い性格。メガネは伊達。
英美=アメリア=ゴールディ=明智
えいみ・あめりあ・ごーるでぃ・あけち
2年B組。クォーター。普段は「エイミィ」と呼ばれている。名門ゴールディ家の子女。
光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか
2年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。光波振動系魔法が得意。思い込むとやや直情的。

『人間主義』と国内の情勢

一般的な認識は『人間は人間に許された力だけで生きよう』と主張し反魔法主義を掲げるキリスト教亜種（異端）のカルト運動。またはそれを建前とした、魔法師排斥運動である。その教義の一部を紹介すると、「奇跡は神にのみ許された御業であり、神が定めた自然の摂理を神ならざるものがねじ曲げるのは悪魔の所業である。人は、人に許された力でのみ生きなければならない」といったもの。

西暦二〇九七年二月。日本の箱根で行われていた魔法師達による『師族会議』中に、大規模な爆弾テロが起きた。このテロの原因は魔法師同士の争いであると主張する人間主義者達は、市民を見殺しにした日本の魔法師に対して、その排斥運動をより活発に、より過激に行うようになった。そして、十師族の長らは、その対策に苦慮している現状がある。

ハッキングシステム『フリズスキャルヴ』

USNA軍が運用する全地球通信傍受システム「エシェロンⅢ」に潜むシステムのこと。『七賢人』と呼ばれる七名のオペレーターがそのアクセス権を持ち、世界中の通信システムから望みの情報を盗み取る。フリズスキャルヴの端末は脳波とジェスチャーで操作するVR型のHMDで、カメラが指先の動きを捉え、バーチャルな視界にその軌跡を映し出す。オペレーターは仮想の空中に光の文字で検索条件を記し、脳波アシストにより選択と決定のコマンドを送り情報を掴み取る、世界最高峰の盗聴システムなのである。

ただし、そもそも『七賢人』の名称を使っているのはフリズスキャルヴのオペレーター内でも、一人しかいない。それが『フリズスキャルヴ』のアドミニストレーターと唯一直接のつながりを持つ、レイモンド・S・クラークだった。

顧傑とは

ジード・ヘイグこと顧傑は大漢の魔法師開発機関である崑崙方院に所属していた。崑崙方院で『不老の術法』を開発した顧傑が、日本魔法界を、そして崑崙方院を潰した四葉一族を復讐のターゲットとしている理由は不明（どのような心理機構が作用したのか、本人も既に、覚えていないかもしれない）。

顧傑は現在九十七歳。だがその外見は五十歳程度にしか見えない。周公瑾を弟子に持つが、しかし顧傑個人の直接的な戦闘力は低い。大陸の古式魔法の使い手だが、修得している魔法は敵と直接干戈を交える為のものではなかった。彼が得意としているのは『ソーサリーブースター』のような人間を部品として魔法的な道具を作り出す技術、『ジェネレーター』のような人間を道具に変える技術、そして今回のテロに使用した死体を操る技術などである。

加え、『七賢人』の一人として裏社会に君臨する顧傑は、様々な反社会的組織を支援している。反魔法国際政治団体『ブランシュ』、国際犯罪シンジケート『無頭竜（ノーヘッドドラゴン）』などもその中の一組織だった。しかし、これらもすでに壊滅状態となっている。

そして、顧傑自身に残された時間も、もう長くない。

"Humanism" and Domestic Affairs

It is universally recognized that "Humans should live by the power bestowed upon humans" so claims the anti-magic touting religious sub cult of Christians (Heretics). Or, rather, it was a cover story used to boycott Magicians. Introducing one part of this creed is their claim that, "Miracles are only permitted for gods, everything that twists the creation of God's providence is the act of the devil. Humans must only live by the power bestowed upon them".

February 2097 A.D. A large scale terror act happened during the Master Clans Conference in Hakone, Japan. Humanist advocates claimed that the cause of this terror act was because of strife between Magicians, and that the Magicians let civilians die without helping them. This intensified the anti-Magician sentiment. Following this, The Heads of the Ten Master Clans are racking their brains about countermeasures for this situation.

Hacking system "Hliðskjálf"

The USNA Army uses a hidden system "ECHELON III" that can intercept information worldwide. The seven operators who have access to this system are called the "Seven Sages", and can steal any information they wish from around the world. Hliðskjálf's terminal is controlled by brainwaves and gestures using a virtual reality headset and a camera that tracks the movements of the operator's fingertips. This is reflected inside the virtual world that the user sees. The operator can enter their search criteria by writing characters of light in the air using their imagination, and can choose to send commands to grasp information using their brainwaves, this is the world's greatest interception system.

However, from the beginning, within the operators of Hliðskjálf who use the title of the "Seven Sages", there is only one person. That is Raymond S. Clark, who possesses a direct link to the administrator of Hliðskjálf.

"Who is Gu Jie"

Jiedo Heigu or Gu Jie is affiliated with the great Magicians of the Kunlunfang Institute. At the Kunlunfang, Gu Jie developed eternal youth magic. The reason why he targeted the Japanese Magic Community and the Yotsuba is unclear (Even he probably can't even remember what kind of mental gymnastics he used to come to this conclusion).

Gu Jie is 97 years old. However, from his appearance, you would think he was only 50 years old. Zhou Gongjin is his disciple. Although, Gu Jie's individual fighting strength is low. He is a user of Ancient Magic from the Continent, however, he does not specialize in direct confrontations with his enemies. His specialty technique is like "Sorcery Booster," which is turning human's parts into magic accessories, a technique that changes humans into a Generator. He manipulates corpses for this time's act of terror with his techniques.

Additionally, as a member of the "Seven Sages", he ruled the underground and he supported various underground organizations like The internal anti-Magic Association, "Blanche", and the International Crime Syndicate "No Head Dragon". However, they have already been destroyed.

And now, the time he has left to live is also coming to a close.

魔法科高校の劣等生 18

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ある欠陥を抱える劣等生の兄。
全てが完全無欠な優等生の妹。
二人の兄妹が魔法科高校に入学した時から、
波乱の日々の幕が開いた――。

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato
illustration
石田可奈
Kana Ishida

Character
キャラクター紹介

吉田幹比古
よしだ・みきひこ

２年B組。今年から一科生となる。
古式魔法の名家。
エリカとは幼少時からの顔見知り。

司波達也
しば・たつや

２年E組。新設された
魔工科に進学した。
全てに達観している。
妹・深雪の『ガーディアン』。

光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか

２年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
光波振動系魔法が得意。
思い込むとやや直情的。

司波深雪
しば・みゆき

２年A組。達也の妹。
昨年主席入学した優等生。
冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する。

西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると

２年F組。達也の友人。
二科生生徒。硬化魔法が得意な、
明るい性格の持ち主。

北山 雫
きたやま・しずく

２年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
振動・加速系魔法が得意。
感情の起伏をあまり表に出さない。

千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか

２年F組。達也の友人。
二科生生徒。チャーミングな
トラブルメーカー。

柴田美月
しばた・みづき

２年E組。今年も達也と
同じクラスになった。
霊子放射光過敏症。
少し天然が入った真面目な少女。

英美=アメリア=ゴールディ=明智
えいみ・あめりあ・ごーるでぃ・あけち
2年B組。クォーター。
普段は『エイミィ』と
呼ばれている。
名門ゴールディ家の子女。

里美スバル
さとみ・すばる
2年D組。
美少年と見まごう少女。
明るくノリの良い性格。

桜小路紅葉
さくらこうじ・あかは
2年B組。スバル、エイミィの友達。
私服はゴスロリ風で、
テーマパーク好き。

森崎 駿
もりさき・しゅん
2年A組。深雪の
クラスメイト。CAD早撃ちが得意。
一科生としてのプライドが高い。

十三束 鋼
とみつか・はがね
2年E組。『レンジ・ゼロ』(射程距離ゼロ)の異名を持つ。
『マーシャル・マジック・アーツ』の使い手。

七草真由美
さえぐさ・まゆみ
卒業生。今は魔法大学生。
小悪魔的な性格を
持つものの、
攻められると弱い。

中条あずさ
なかじょう・あずさ
三年生。前・生徒会会長。
オドオドした性格で
引っ込み思案。

市原鈴音
いちはら・すずね
卒業生。今は魔法大学生。
冷静沈着な頭脳派。

服部刑部少丞範蔵
はっとり・ぎょうぶしょうじょう・はんぞう
三年生。前・部活連会頭。
優秀だが、生真面目
すぎる一面も。

渡辺摩利
わたなべ・まり
卒業生。真由美の親友。
物事全般にやや好戦的。

十文字克人
じゅうもんじ・かつと
卒業生。現在は
魔法大学に進学している。
達也曰く『巌(いわお)のような人物』。

関本 勲
せきもと・いさお
卒業生。元・風紀委員。
論文コンペ校内選考次点。
スパイ行為を犯した人物。

桐原武明
きりはら・たけあき
三年生。剣術部所属。
関東剣術大会中等部の
チャンピオン。

壬生紗耶香
みぶ・さやか
三年生。剣道部所属。
中等部剣道大会女子部の
全国二位。

七草香澄
さえぐさ・かすみ
今年、魔法科高校に入学した
『新入生』。七草真由美の妹。
泉美の双子の姉。
元気で快活な性格。

七草泉美
さえぐさ・いずみ
今年、魔法科高校に
入学した『新入生』。
七草真由美の妹。
香澄の双子の妹。
大人しく穏やかな性格。

隅守賢人
すみす・けんと
1年G組。両親がUSNAから
日本に帰化した、白人の少年。

辰巳鋼太郎
たつみ・こうたろう
卒業生。元・風紀委員。
豪快な性格の持ち主。

沢木 碧
さわき・みどり
三年生。風紀委員。
女性的な名前が
コンプレックス。

五十里 啓
いそり・けい
三年生。前・生徒会会計。
魔法理論に優れている。
花音とは許嫁同士。

千代田花音
ちよだ・かのん
三年生。前・風紀委員長。
先輩の摩利同様に
好戦的。

七宝琢磨
しっぽう・たくま
今年の『新入生』総代を
務める生徒。一科生。
有力魔法師の家系
「師補十八家」のひとつ
『七宝』の長男。

桜井水波
さくらい・みなみ
今年、魔法科高校に入学した
『新入生』。達也、深雪の
従妹という立場をとる、
深雪のガーディアン候補。

安宿怜美
あすか・さとみ
第一高校保険医。
おっとりホンワカした笑顔が
男子生徒に人気。

平河小春
ひらかわ・こはる
卒業生。
昨年の九校戦ではエンジニアで参加。
論文コンペメンバーを辞退。

廿楽計夫
つづら・かずお
第一高校教師。
専門は魔法幾何学。
論文コンペの世話役。

平河千秋
ひらかわ・ちあき
２年E組所属。
達也に敵意を向ける。

ジェニファー・スミス
日本に帰化した白人。達也のクラスと
魔法工学の授業の指導教師。

千倉朝子
ちくら・ともこ
三年生。九校戦新競技
『シールド・ダウン』の女子ソロ代表。

小野 遥
おの・はるか
第一高校に所属する
総合カウンセラー。
いじられ気質だが、
裏の顔も持つ。

五十嵐亜実
いがらし・つぐみ
卒業生。元バイアスロン部部長。

五十嵐鷹輔
いがらし・ようすけ
二年生。亜実の弟。
やや気弱な性格。

九重八雲
ここのえ・やくも
古式魔法「忍術」の使い手。
達也の体術の師匠。

三七上ケリー
みなかみ・ケリー
三年生。九校戦『モノリス・コード』
本戦の男子代表。

上野
こうづけ
東京を地盤にする与党の若手政治家。
魔法師に好意的な議員として
知られている。

神田
かんだ
民権党に所属している若手政治家。
国防軍に対して批判的な
人権派である。反魔法主義でもある。

一条剛毅
いちじょう・ごうき
将輝の父親。十師族・
一条家の現当主。

一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき
第三高校の二年生。
今年も九校戦に出場。
十師族・一条家の次期当主。

一条美登里
いちじょう・みどり
将輝の母親。
温和な性格で
料理上手。

吉祥寺真紅郎
きちじょうじ・しんくろう
第三高校の二年生。
今年も九校戦に出場。
「カーディナル・ジョージ」の
異名で知られている。

一条 茜
いちじょう・あかね
一条家の長女。将輝の妹。
今年地元の名門私立中学に入学。
真紅郎に好意を抱く。

北山 潮
きたやま・うしお
雫の父親。実業界の大物。
ビジネスネームは北方潮。

一条瑠璃
いちじょう・るり
一条家の次女。将輝の妹。
マイペースなしっかりもの。

北山紅音
きたやま・べにお
雫の母親。かつては、
振動系魔法で名を馳せた
Aランクの魔法師。

北山 航
きたやま・わたる
雫の弟。小学六年生。
姉をよく慕っている。
魔工技師を目指す。

鳴瀬晴海
なるせ・はるみ
雫の従兄。国立魔法大学付属
第四高校の生徒。

ピクシー
魔法科高校が所有する
ホームヘルパーのロボット。
正式名称は3H
(Humanoid Home Helper :
人型家事手伝いロボット)・タイプP94。

牛山
うしやま
フォア・リーブス・
テクノロジーCAD開発
第三課主任。
達也が信頼を置く人物。

千葉寿和
ちば・としかず
千葉エリカの長兄。
警察省のキャリア組。
一見は遊び人風。

エルンスト・ローゼン

有数のCADメーカー、
ローゼン・マギクラフト
日本支社長。

千葉修次
ちば・なおつぐ
千葉エリカの次兄。摩利の恋人。
千刃流剣術免許皆伝で
「千葉の麒麟児」の異名をとる。

九島 烈
くどう・れつ
世界最強の魔法師の
一人と目されていた人物。
敬意を以て「老師」と
呼ばれる。

稲垣
いながき
警察省の警部補。
千葉寿和の部下。

九島真言
くどう・まこと
日本魔法界の長老・九島烈の
息子で、九島家の現当主。

**アンナ＝
ローゼン＝鹿取**
あんな・ろーぜん・かとり
エリカの母。日独のハーフで、
エリカの父・千葉家当主の
「妾」だった人物。

九島光宣
くどう・みのる
真言の息子。国立魔法大学
付属第二高校の一年生だが、
病気がちで頻繁に欠席している。
藤林響子の異父弟でもある。

九鬼 鎮
くき・まもる
九島家に従う師補十八家の一つ。
九島烈を先生と呼び
敬っている。

小和村真紀
さわむら・まき
由緒ある映画賞の
主演女優部門に
ノミネートされるほどの女優。
美貌だけでなく、演技も認められている。

周公瑾
しゅう・こうきん
大亜連合の
呂と陳を横浜に手引きした
美貌の青年。中華街に
巣くっていた、謎の人物。

陳祥山
チェンシャンシェン
大亜連合軍
特殊工作部隊隊長。
非情な性格の持ち主。

呂剛虎
ルゥガンフゥ
大亜連合軍特殊工作部隊
所属のエース魔法師。
別名『人喰い虎』。

リン
森崎が助けた少女。フルネームは
『孫美鈴（スンメイリン）』。
香港系国際犯罪
シンジケート「無頭竜」の
新たなリーダー。

風間玄信
かざま・はるのぶ
陸軍101旅団・
独立魔装大隊・隊長。
階級は中佐。

真田繁留
さなだ・しげる
陸軍101旅団・
独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は少佐。

藤林響子
ふじばやし・きょうこ
風間の副官を務める
女性士官。階級は中尉。

佐伯広海
さえき・ひろみ
国防陸軍第101旅団旅団長。階級は少将。
独立魔装大隊隊長・風間玄信の上官。
その風貌から「銀狐」の異名を持つ。

柳 連
やなぎ・むらじ
陸軍101旅団・
独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は少佐。

山中幸典
やまなか・こうすけ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
軍医少佐。一級の治癒魔法師。

酒井
さかい
国防陸軍総司令部所属。階級は大佐。
対大亜連合強硬派と目されている。

四葉真夜
よつば・まや
達也と深雪の叔母。
深夜の双子の妹。
四葉家の現当主。

司波深夜
しば・みや
達也と深雪の実母。故人。
精神構造干渉魔法に長けた
唯一の魔法師。

葉山
はやま
真夜に仕える
老齢の執事。

桜井穂波
さくらい・ほなみ
深夜の『ガーディアン』。故人。
遺伝子操作により魔法資質を
強化された調整体魔法師
『桜』シリーズの第一世代。

新発田勝成
しばた・かつしげ
元・四葉家次期当主候補の
一人。防衛省の職員。
第五高校のOB。
収束系魔法を得意とする。

司波小百合
しば・さゆり
達也と深雪の義母。
二人を嫌悪している。

堤 琴鳴
つつみ・ことな
新発田勝成のガーディアン。
調整体「楽師シリーズ」の
第二世代。音に関する魔法に
高い適性を持つ。

津久葉夕歌
つくば・ゆうか
元・四葉家次期当主候補の一人。
第一高校の元・生徒会副会長。
魔法大学四年生で
精神干渉系魔法が得意。

堤 奏太
つつみ・かなた
新発田勝成の
ガーディアン。調整体
「楽師シリーズ」の第二世代。
琴鳴の弟で、彼女と同じく
音に関する魔法に
高い適性を持つ。

吉見
よしみ
黒羽家と縁戚関係にある四葉の魔法師。
人体に残された想子情報体の
痕跡を読み取るサイコメトリスト。
極度の秘密主義。

アンジェリーナ＝クドウ＝シールズ

USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』総隊長。
階級は少佐。愛称はリーナ。
戦略級魔法師「十三使徒」の一人でもある。

ヴァージニア・バランス

ＵＳＮＡ統合参謀本部情報部内部監察局第一副局長。
階級は大佐。リーナを支援するため日本にやってきた。

シルヴィア・マーキュリー・ファースト

USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』惑星級魔法師。階級は准尉。
愛称はシルヴィで、『マーキュリー・ファースト』はコードネーム。
日本での作戦時は、シリウス少佐の補佐役を務める。

ベンジャミン・カノープス

USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』ナンバー・ツー。
階級は少佐。シリウス少佐が不在時は
総隊長を代行する。

ミカエラ・ホンゴウ

USNAより日本に送り込まれた諜報員
（ただし本職は国防総省所属の魔法研究者）。
愛称はミア。

クレア

ハンターQ――『スターズ』になれなかった
魔法師部隊『スターダスト』の女兵士。
Qは追跡部隊の17番目を意味する。

レイチェル

ハンターR――『スターズ』になれなかった
魔法師部隊『スターダスト』の女兵士。
Rは追跡部隊の18番目を意味する。

アルフレッド・フォーマルハウト

USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』一等星魔法師。
階級は中尉。愛称はフレディ。
スターズを脱走。

チャールズ・サリバン

USNAの魔法師部隊『スターズ』
衛星級魔法師。『デーモス・セカンド』の
コードネームで呼ばれる。
スターズを脱走。

レイモンド・S・クラーク

雫が留学したUSNAバークレーにある高校の同級生。
なにかにつけ、雫にモーションを掛けてくる、
白人の少年。その正体は
『七賢人』の一人。

顧 傑

グ・ジー

『七賢人』の一人。ジード・ヘイグとも呼ばれる、
大漢軍方術士部隊の生き残り。

黒羽 貢

くろば・みつぐ

司波深夜、四葉真夜の従弟。
亜夜子、文弥の父。

近江円磨

おうみ・かずきよ

『反魂術』に詳しいという魔法研究家で、
『人形師』とあだ名される古式魔法師。
死体を操り人形に変える
禁断の魔法を使うと噂される。

黒羽亜夜子

くろば・あやこ

達也と深雪の
再従妹（はとこ）にあたる少女。
文弥という双子の弟を持つ。
第四高校の生徒。

黒羽文弥

くろば・ふみや

元・四葉家の次期当主候補。
達也と深雪の再従弟（はとこ）にあたる少年。
亜夜子という双子の姉を持つ。
第四高校の生徒。

七草弘一

さえぐさ・こういち

真由美の父で、七草家当主。
超一流の魔法師でもある。

名倉三郎

なくら・さぶろう

七草家に雇われている強力な魔法師。
主に真由美の身辺警護をしていた。

二木舞衣
ふたつぎ・まい

十師族『二木家』当主。兵庫県芦屋在住。
表の職業は複数の化学工業、食品工業会社の大株主。
阪神・中国地方を監視、守護している。

三矢 元
みつや・げん

十師族『三矢家』当主。神奈川県厚木在住。
表の職業（と言えるかどうかは微妙なところだが）は、
国際的な小型兵器ブローカー。
今も稼働する第三研の
運用を担当している。

五輪勇海
いつわ・いさみ

十師族『五輪家』当主。愛媛県宇和島在住。
表の職業は海運会社の重役で実質オーナー。
四国地方を監視、守護している。

六塚温子
むつづか・あつこ

十師族『六塚家』当主。宮城県仙台在住。
表の職業は地熱発電所掘削会社の実質オーナー。
東北地方を監視、守護している。

八代雷蔵
やつしろ・らいぞう

十師族『八代家』当主。福岡県在住。
表の職業は大学の講師で複数の通信会社の大株主。
沖縄を除く九州地方を監視、守護している。

十文字和樹
じゅうもんじ・かずき

十師族『十文字家』当主。東京都在住。
表の職業は国防軍を得意先とする土木建設会社のオーナー。
七草家と共に伊豆を含む関東地方を監視、守護している。

一部イラスト協力／魔法科高校製作委員会

Glossary
用語解説

魔法科高校
国立魔法大学付属高校の通称。全国に九校設置されている。
この内、第一から第三までが一学年定員二百名で
一科・二科制度を採っている。

ブルーム、ウィード
第一高校における一科生、二科生の格差を表す隠語。
一科生の制服の左胸には八枚花弁のエンブレムが
刺繍されているが、二科生の制服にはこれが無い。

一科生のエンブレム

CAD〔シー・エー・ディー〕
魔法発動を簡略化させるデバイス。
内部には魔法のプログラムが記録されている。
特化型、汎用型などタイプ・形状は様々。

司波達也のCAD

司波深雪のCAD

フォア・リーブス・テクノロジー〔FLT〕
国内CADメーカーの一つ。
元々完成品よりも魔法工学部品で有名だったが、
シルバー・モデルの開発により
一躍CADメーカーとしての知名度が増した。

トーラス・シルバー
僅か一年の間に特化型CADのソフトウェアを
十年は進歩させたと称えられる天才技術者。

エイドス〔個別情報体〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学において
エイドスとは、事象に付随する情報体のことで、
「世界」にその「事象」が存在することの記録で、
「事象」が「世界」に記す足跡とも言える。
現代魔法学における「魔法」の定義は、エイドスを改変することによって、
その本体である「事象」を改変する技術とされている。

イデア〔情報体次元〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてイデアとは、エイドスが記録されるプラットフォームのこと。
魔法の一次的形態は、このイデアというプラットフォームに魔法式を出力して、
そこに記録されているエイドスを書き換える技術である。

起動式
魔法の設計図であり、魔法を構築するためのプログラム。
CADには起動式のデータが圧縮保存されており、
魔法師から流し込まれたサイオン波を展開したデータに従って信号化し、魔法師に返す。

サイオン（想子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、認識や思考結果を記録する情報素子のこと。
現代魔法の理論的基盤であるエイドス、現代魔法の根幹を支える技術である起動式や魔法式は
サイオンで構築された情報体である。

プシオン（霊子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、その存在は確認されているがその正体、その機能については
未だ解明されていない。一般的な魔法師は、活性化したプシオンを「感じる」ことができるにとどまる。

魔法師
『魔法技能師』の略語。魔法技能師とは、実用レベルで魔法を行使するスキルを持つ者の総称。

魔法式
事象に付随する情報を一時的に改変する為の情報体。魔法師が保有するサイオンで構築されている。

魔法演算領域
魔法式を構築する精神領域。魔法という才能の、いわば本体。魔法師の無意識領域に存在し、
魔法師は通常、魔法演算領域を意識して使うことは出来ても、そこで行われている処理のプロセスを
意識することは出来ない。魔法演算領域は、魔法師自身にとってもブラックボックスと言える。

魔法式の出力プロセス
❶起動式をＣＡＤから受信する。これを「起動式の読込」という。
❷起動式に変数を追加して魔法演算領域に送る。
❸起動式と変数から魔法式を構築する。
❹構築した魔法式を、無意識領域の最上層にして
　意識領域の最下層たる「ルート」に転送、意識と無意識の
　狭間に存在する「ゲート」から、イデアへ出力する。
❺イデアに出力された魔法式は、指定された座標の
　エイドスに干渉しこれを書き換える。

単一系統・単一工程の魔法で、この五段階のプロセスを
半秒以内で完了させることが、「実用レベル」の
魔法師としての目安になる。

魔法の評価基準（魔法力）
サイオン情報体を構築する速さが魔法の処理能力であり、
構築できる情報体の規模が魔法のキャパシティであり、
魔法式がエイドスを書き換える強さが干渉力、
この三つを総合して魔法力と呼ばれる。

基本コード仮説
「加速」「加重」「移動」「振動」「収束」「発散」「吸収」「放出」の四系統八種にそれぞれ対応した
プラスとマイナス、合計十六種類の基本となる魔法式が存在していて、
この十六種類を組み合わせることで全ての系統魔法を構築することができるという理論。

系統魔法
四系統八種に属する魔法のこと。

系統外魔法
物質的な現象ではなく精神的な現象を操作する魔法の総称。
心霊存在を使役する神霊魔法・精霊魔法から読心、幽体分離、意識操作まで多種にわたる。

十師族
日本で最強の魔法師集団。一条（いちじょう）、一之倉（いちのくら）、一色（いっしき）、二木（ふたつぎ）、
二階堂（にかいどう）、二瓶（にへい）、三矢（みつや）、三日月（みかづき）、四葉（よつば）、五輪（いつわ）、
五頭（ごとう）、五味（いつみ）、六塚（むつづか）、六角（ろっかく）、六郷（ろくごう）、六本木（ろっぽんぎ）、
七草（さえぐさ）、七宝（しっぽう）、七夕（たなばた）、七瀬（ななせ）、八代（やつしろ）、八朔（はっさく）、
八幡（はちまん）、九島（くどう）、九鬼（くき）、九頭見（くずみ）、十文字（じゅうもんじ）、十山（とおやま）の
二十八の家系から四年に一度の「十師族選定会議」で選ばれた十の家系が『十師族』を名乗る。

数字付き
十師族の苗字に一から十までの数字が入っているように、百家の中でも本流とされている家系の
苗字には“『千』代田”、“『五十』里”、“『千』葉”家の様に、十一以上の数字が入っている。
数値の大小が力の強弱を表すものではないが、苗字に数字が入っているかどうかは、
血筋が大きく物を言う、魔法師の力量を推測する一つの目安となる。

数字落ち
エクストラ・ナンバーズ、略して「エクストラ」とも呼ばれる、「数字」を剥奪された魔法師の一族。
かつて、魔法師が兵器であり実験体サンプルであった頃、「成功例」としてナンバーを与えられた
魔法師が、「成功例」に相応しい成果を上げられなかった為に捺された烙印。

様々な魔法

● コキュートス

精神を凍結させる系統外魔法。凍結した精神は肉体に死を命じることも出来ず、
この魔法を掛けられた相手は、精神の「静止」に伴い肉体も停止・硬直してしまう。
精神と肉体の相互作用により、肉体の部分的な結晶化が観測されることもある。

● 地鳴り

独立情報体「精霊」を媒体として地面を振動させる古式魔法。

● 術式解散〔グラム・ディスパージョン〕

魔法の本体である魔法式を、意味の有る構造を持たないサイオン粒子群に分解する魔法。
魔法式は事象に付随する情報体に作用するという性質上、その情報構造が露出していなければならず、
魔法式そのものに対する干渉を防ぐ手立ては無い。

● 術式解体〔グラム・デモリッション〕

圧縮したサイオン粒子の塊をイデアを経由せずに対象物へ直接ぶつけて爆発させ、そこに付け加えられた
起動式や魔法式などの、魔法を記録したサイオン情報体を吹き飛ばしてしまう無系統魔法。
魔法といっても、事象改変の為の魔法式としての構造を持たないサイオンの砲弾であるため情報強化や
領域干渉には影響されない。また、砲弾自体の持つ圧力がキャスト・ジャミングの影響も撥ね返してしまう。
物理的な作用が皆無である故に、どんな障碍物でも防ぐことは出来ない。

● 地雷原

土、岩、砂、コンクリートなど、材質は問わず、
とにかく「地面」という概念を有する固体に強い振動を与える魔法。

● 地割れ

独立情報体「精霊」を媒体として地面を線上に押し潰し、
一見地面を引き裂いたかのような外観を作り出す魔法。

● ドライ・ブリザード

空気中の二酸化炭素を集め、ドライアイスの粒子を作り出し、
凍結過程で余った熱エネルギーを運動エネルギーに変換してドライアイス粒子を高速で飛ばす魔法。

● 這い寄る雷蛇〔スリザリン・サンダース〕

『ドライ・ブリザード』のドライアイス気化によって水蒸気を凝結させ、気化した二酸化炭素を
溶け込ませた導電性の高い霧を作り出した上で、振動系魔法と放出系魔法で摩擦電気を発生させる。
そして、炭酸ガスが溶け込んだ霧や水滴を導線として敵に電撃を浴びせるコンビネーション魔法。

● ニブルヘイム

振動減速系広域魔法。大容積の空気を冷却し、
それを移動させることで広い範囲を凍結させる。
端的に言えば、超大型の冷凍庫を作り出すようなものである。
発動時に生じる白い霧は空中で凍結した氷や
ドライアイスの粒子だが、レベルを上げると凝結した
液体窒素の霧が混じることもある。

● 爆裂

対象物内部の液体を気化させる発散系魔法。
生物ならば体液が気化して身体が破裂、
内燃機関動力の機械ならば燃料が気化して爆散する。
燃料電池でも結果は同じで、可燃性の燃料を搭載していなくても、
バッテリー液や油圧液や冷却液や潤滑液など、およそ液体を搭載していない機械は存在しないため、
『爆裂』が発動すればほぼあらゆる機械が破壊され停止する。

● 乱れ髪

角度を指定して風向きを変えて行くのではなく、「もつれさせる」という曖昧な結果をもたらす
気流操作により、地面すれすれの気流を起こして相手の足に草を絡みつかせる古式魔法。
ある程度丈の高い草が生えている野原でのみ使用可能。

魔法技能師開発研究所

西暦2030年代、第三次世界大戦前に緊迫化する国際情勢に対応して日本政府が次々に設立した魔法師開発の為の研究所。その目的は魔法の開発ではなくあくまでも魔法師の開発であり、目的とする魔法に最適な魔法師を産み出す為の遺伝子操作を含めて研究されていた。

魔法技能師開発研究所は第一から第十までの10ヶ所設立され、現在も5ヶ所が稼働中である。

各研究所の詳細は以下のとおり。

魔法技能師開発第一研究所

2031年、金沢市に設立。現在は閉鎖。

テーマは対人戦闘を想定した生体に直接干渉する魔法の開発。気化魔法「爆裂」はその派生形態。ただし人体の動きを操作する魔法はパペット・テロ（操り人形化した人間によるカミカゼテロ）を誘発するものとして禁止されていた。

魔法技能師開発第二研究所

2031年、淡路島に設立。稼働中。

第一研のテーマと対をなす魔法として、無機物に干渉する魔法、特に酸化還元反応に関わる吸収系魔法を開発。

魔法技能師開発第三研究所

2032年、厚木市に設立。稼働中。

単独で様々な状況に対応できる魔法師の開発を目的としてマルチキャストの研究を推進。特に、同時発動、連続発動が可能な魔法数の限界を実験し、多数の魔法を同時発動可能な魔法師を開発。

魔法技能師開発第四研究所

詳細は不明。場所は旧長野県と旧山梨県の県境付近と推定。設立は2033年と推定。現在は閉鎖されたことになっているが、これも実態は不明。旧第四研のみ政府とは別に、国に対し強い影響力を持つスポンサーにより設立され、現在は国から独立しそのスポンサーの支援下で運営されているとの噂がある。またそのスポンサーにより2020年代以前から事実上運営が始まっていたとも噂されている。

精神干渉魔法を利用して、魔法師の無意識領域に存在する魔法という名の異能の源泉、魔法演算領域そのものの強化を目指していたとされている。

魔法技能師開発第五研究所

2035年、四国の宇和島市に設立。稼働中。

物質の形状に干渉する魔法を研究。技術的難度が低い流体制御が主流となるが、固体の形状干渉にも成功している。その成果がＵＳＮＡと共同開発した「バハムート」。流体干渉魔法「アビス」と合わせ、二つの戦略級魔法を開発した魔法研究機関として国際的に名を馳せている。

魔法技能師開発第六研究所

2035年、仙台市に設立。稼働中。

魔法による熱量制御を研究。第八研と並び基礎研究機関的な色彩が強く、その反面軍事的な色彩は薄い。ただ第四研を除く魔法技能師開発研究所の中で、最も多く遺伝子操作実験が行われたと言われている（第四研については実態が不明）。

魔法技能師開発第七研究所

2036年、東京に設立。現在は閉鎖。

対集団戦闘を念頭に置いた魔法を開発。その成果が群体制御魔法。第六研が非軍事的色彩の強いものだった反動で、有事の首都防衛を兼ねた魔法師開発の研究施設として設立された。

魔法技能師開発第八研究所

2037年、北九州市に設立。稼働中。

魔法による重力、電磁力、強い相互作用、弱い相互作用の操作を研究。第六研以上に基礎研究機関的な色彩が強い。ただし、国防軍との結び付きは第六研と異なり強固。これは第八研の研究内容が核兵器の開発と容易に結びつくからであり、国防軍のお墨付きを得て核兵器開発疑惑を免れているという側面がある。

魔法技能師開発第九研究所

2037年、奈良市に設立。現在は閉鎖。

現代魔法と古式魔法の融合、古式魔法のノウハウを現代魔法に取り込むことで、ファジーな術式操作など現代魔法が苦手としている諸課題を解決しようとした。

魔法技能師開発第十研究所

2039年、東京に設立。現在は閉鎖。

第七研と同じく首都防衛の目的を兼ねて、大火力の攻撃に対する防御手段として空間に仮想構築物を生成する領域魔法を研究。その成果が多種多様な対物理障壁魔法。

また第十研は、第四研とは別の手段で魔法能力の引き上げを目指した。具体的には魔法演算領域そのものの強化ではなく、魔法演算領域を一時的にオーバークロックすることで必要に応じ強力な魔法を行使できる魔法師の開発に取り組んだ。ただしその成否は公開されていない。

これら10ヶ所の研究所以外にエレメンツ開発を目的とした研究所が2010年代から2020年代にかけて稼働していたが、現在は全て閉鎖されている。

また国防軍には2002年に設立された陸軍総司令部直属の秘密研究機関があり独自に研究を続けている。

九島烈は第九研に所属するまでこの研究機関で強化措置を受けていた。

魔法剣

魔法による戦闘方法には魔法それ自体を武器にする戦い方の他に、
魔法で武器を強化・操作する技法がある。
銃や弓矢などの飛び道具と組み合わせる術式が多数派だが、
日本では剣技と魔法を組み合わせて戦う「剣術」も発達しており、
現代魔法と古式魔法の双方に魔法剣とも言うべき専用の魔法が編み出されている。

1. 高周波（こうしゅうは）ブレード

刀身を高速振動させ、接触物の分子結合力を超えた振動を伝播させることで
固体を局所的に液状化して切断する魔法。刀身の自壊を防止する術式とワンセットで使用される。

2. 圧斬り（へしきり）

刃先に斬撃方向に対して左右垂直方向の斥力を発生させ、
刃が接触した物体を押し開くように割断する魔法。
斥力場の幅は1ミリ未満の小さなものだが光に干渉する程の強度がある為、
正面から見ると刃先が黒い線になる。

3. ドウジ斬り（童子斬り）

源氏の秘剣として伝承されていた古式魔法。二本の刃を遠隔操作し、
手に持つ刀と合わせて三本の刀で相手を取り囲むようにして同時に切りつける魔法剣技。
本来の意味である「同時斬り」を「童子斬り」の名に隠していた。

4. 斬鉄（ざんてつ）

千葉一門の秘剣。刀を鋼と鉄の塊ではなく、「刀」という単一概念の存在として定義し、
魔法式で設定した斬撃線に沿って動かす移動系統魔法。
単一概念存在と定義された「刀」はあたかも単分子結晶の刃の様に、
折れることも曲がることも欠けることもなく、斬撃線に沿ってあらゆる物体を切り裂く。

5. 迅雷斬鉄（じんらいざんてつ）

専用の武装デバイス「雷丸（いかづちまる）」を用いた「斬鉄」の発展形。
刀と剣士を一つの集合概念として定義することで
接敵から斬撃までの一連の動作が一切の狂い無く高速実行される。

6. 山津波（やまつなみ）

全長180センチの長大な専用武器「大蛇丸（おろちまる）」を用いた千葉一門の秘剣。
自分と刀に掛かる慣性を極小化して敵に高速接近し、
インパクトの瞬間、消していた慣性を上乗せして刀身の慣性を増幅し対象物に叩きつける。
この偽りの慣性質量は助走が長ければ長いほど増大し、最大で十トンに及ぶ。

7. 薄羽蜻蛉（うすばかげろう）

カーボンナノチューブを織って作られた厚さ五ナノメートルの極薄シートを
硬化魔法で完全平面に固定して刃とする魔法。
薄羽蜻蛉で作られた刀身はどんな刀剣、どんな剃刀よりも鋭い切れ味を持つが、
刃を動かす為のサポートが術式に含まれていないので、術者は刀の操作技術と腕力を要求される。

戦略級魔法師・十三使徒

現代魔法は高度な科学技術の中で育まれてきたものである為、
軍事的に強力な魔法の開発が可能な国家は限られている。
その結果、大規模破壊兵器に匹敵する戦略級魔法を開発できたのは一握りの国家だった。
ただ開発した魔法を同盟国に供与することは行われており、
戦略級魔法に高い適性を示した同盟国の魔法師が戦略級魔法師として認められている例もある。
2095年4月段階で、国家により戦略級魔法に適性を認められ対外的に公表された魔法師は13名。
彼らは十三使徒と呼ばれ、世界の軍事バランスの重要ファクターと見なされていた。
十三使徒の所属国、氏名、戦略級魔法の名称は以下のとおり。

USNA
■アンジー・シリウス：「ヘビィ・メタル・バースト」
■エリオット・ミラー：「リヴァイアサン」
■ローラン・バルト：「リヴァイアサン」
※この中でスターズに所属するのはアンジー・シリウスのみであり、
エリオット・ミラーはアラスカ基地、ローラン・バルトは国外のジブラルタル基地から
基本的に動くことはない。

新ソビエト連邦
■イーゴリ・アンドレイビッチ・ベゾブラゾフ：「トゥマーン・ボンバ」
■レオニード・コンドラチェンコ：「シムリャー・アールミヤ」
※コンドラチェンコは高齢の為、黒海基地から基本的に動くことはない。

大亜細亜連合
■劉雲徳（りゅううんとく）：「霹靂塔」
※劉雲徳は2095年10月31日の対日戦闘で戦死している。

インド・ペルシア連邦
■バラット・チャンドラ・カーン：「アグニ・ダウンバースト」

日本
■五輪 澪（いつわみお）：「深淵（アビス）」

ブラジル
■ミゲル・ディアス：「シンクロライナー・フュージョン」
※魔法式はUSNAより供与されたもの。

イギリス
■ウィリアム・マクロード：「オゾンサークル」

ドイツ
■カーラ・シュミット：「オゾンサークル」
※オゾンサークルはオゾンホール対策として分裂前のEUで共同研究された魔法を原型としており、
イギリスで完成した魔法式が協定により旧EU諸国に公開された。

トルコ
■アリ・シャーヒーン：「バハムート」
※魔法式はUSNAと日本の共同で開発されたものであり、日本主導で供与された。

タイ
■ソム・チャイ・ブンナーク：「アグニ・ダウンバースト」
※魔法式はインド・ペルシアより供与されたもの。

The International Situation

2096年現在の世界情勢

世界の寒冷化を直接の契機とする第三次世界大戦、二〇年世界群発戦争により世界の地図は大きく塗り替えられた。現在の状況は以下のとおり。

ＵＳＡはカナダ及びメキシコからパナマまでの諸国を併合して北アメリカ大陸合衆国（ＵＳＮＡ）を形成。

ロシアはウクライナ、ベラルーシを再吸収して新ソビエト連邦（新ソ連）を形成。

中国はビルマ北部、ベトナム北部、ラオス北部、朝鮮半島を征服して大亜細亜連合（大亜連合）を形成。

インドとイランは中央アジア諸国（トルクメニスタン、ウズベキスタン、タジキスタン、アフガニスタン）及び南アジア諸国（パキスタン、ネパール、ブータン、バングラデシュ、スリランカ）を呑み込んでインド・ペルシア連邦を形成。

他のアジア・アラブ諸国は地域ごとに軍事同盟を締結し新ソ連、大亜連合、インド・ペルシアの三大国に対抗。

オーストラリアは事実上の鎖国を選択。

ＥＵは統合に失敗し、ドイツとフランスを境に東西分裂。東西ＥＵも統合国家の形成に至らず、結合は戦前よりむしろ弱体化している。

アフリカは諸国の半分が国家ごと消滅し、生き残った国家も辛うじて都市周辺の支配権を維持している状態となっている。

南アメリカはブラジルを除き地方政府レベルの小国分立状態に陥っている。

Chapter 6

On February 5th, 2097 A.D., around 10.30 A.M., a large-scale bombing took place in a certain hotel in Hakone.

The targeted hotel was the venue selected for the Ten Master Clans Conference. At the time of the terrorist attack, the 18 Assistant Houses had already left the hotel premises. However, the Family Heads of the newly selected Ten Master Clans were still inside the building, discussing the problems faced by the Japanese Magic Community.

Tatsuya, Miyuki, Minami, Takuma, Kasumi, and Izumi had received the news during class and immediately headed out to the scene. Upon arriving, they could hear screams ringing throughout the neighborhood.

There were injured and dead people being carried out of the burnt hotel. Many of the injured were sitting by the street while being treated. There were intermittent roars from bombs left in the rubble that were just now exploding. The unexpected devastation was similar to the Yokohama Incident from the autumn of 2 years ago.

Tatsuya held Miyuki back by grasping her shoulder as she attempted to step towards the hotel.

"Onii-sama…?"

Miyuki looked back, and Tatsuya shook his head.

"It's better to not interfere."

Tatsuya restrained Miyuki as she tried to extinguish the fire with her magic.

The fire was more or less extinguished already. It was still dangerous, since they didn't know how many explosives were left inside, but the firefighters on location were trained for this. Tatsuya thought it would be better to leave this to the experts, as the group wasn't familiar with this field.

"More importantly, we should try to locate Aunt-, no, Mother and the others."

Tatsuya almost said ‘Oba-ue', then he remembered that he was together with Takuma and the others. It was probably unnecessary to correct himself, but he was determined to avoid any situation that could bring any doubt to the ‘setting'.

"Over there."

Even when he was talking to Miyuki, Tatsuya kept looking around, and faster than Takuma and Izumi did, spotted the Family Heads of the Ten Master Clans.

Although seeing the Family Heads together as they currently were was quite intimidating, he was curious as to why they'd stick together in this situation. Tatsuya tilted his head and immediately saw the figure of a plain-clothed detective next to them.

"Otou-sama!"

Izumi broke out into a run while disregarding her surroundings.

"Ah, wait a minute, Izumi!"

Kasumi also chased after her recklessly.

"That, is that a detective…?"

Even though they were all searching for their parents, Takuma seemed to be much calmer than the twins.

However, even he yielded to circumstances.

"Onii-sama, what do you think about this?"

Apparently, the Family Heads of the Ten Master Clans were being questioned about the situation, so Miyuki asked Tatsuya what they should do. Minami was also looking at him expectantly.

"Let's keep an eye on Izumi and the others alone."

The six of them had left school early to rush over here. Given the situation, they didn't even have time to change out of their uniforms.

Due to this, with his apparent status of an upperclassman, he had an obligation to stop the freshman who were about to start a ruckus. Tatsuya conveyed 'no other choice' from his eyes to Miyuki and Minami as he walked to where Maya was standing.

"Why are Otou-sama and the others being interrogated by the police!? They're the victims here!"

Sure enough, Izumi was lashing out at the detective. Contrary to her usual lady-like behavior, she could bare her fangs at times like this. Although, in the eyes of the public, it might be perceived as youthful and impulsive.

(Even so… Why did no one stop Izumi?)

None of the Family Heads tried to restrain the loudly protesting Izumi, rather, everyone was just watching from the sidelines. At the very least, her father, Saegusa Kouichi, should have rebuked her. But he hadn't, and even with his meek expression, you could see he looked pretty amused with the laughter in his eyes.

The detective was only taken aback for a moment, but it seemed things would turn sour shortly if Izumi wasn't kept in check. In the end, it would unnecessarily lead to a worse situation —— for his Aunt —— for all of them. Since the adults had washed their hands of the matter, Tatsuya reluctantly took the role upon himself.

"Izumi, that's enough."

"Shiba-senpai, why did you stop me?"

Izumi shook Tatsuya's hand off her shoulder.

Using the force that was directed towards him, Tatsuya controlled Izumi's center of gravity.

Izumi resisted, but Tatsuya led her movement, as if they were dancing, to painlessly tear her attention away from the detective.

"Cool your head. The police are only doing their duty."

His words weren't intended for Izumi alone. They were also directed to restrain Kasumi and Takuma.

"If you're getting in his way, the questioning will only get longer. I'm sorry for the disturbance."

The second half of his sentence was directed to the plain-clothed detective. The strangely acquiescent words, which assumed the blame was Izumi's, were received with a nod from the detective.

Tatsuya pulled Izumi's hand, and hinted to Takuma and Izumi to leave the adults in order to let them settle their business first.

The Family Heads of the Ten Master Clans, excluding Maya, looked at him with great interest.

Kouichi and Gouki in particular gave him a very intriguing look.

Either the questioning had just started, or as Tatsuya said, it was prolonged for longer than expected. At this point, the Family Heads weren't just being questioned by the plain-clothed detective, but a crowd of police officers had surrounded them as well. It was as if they were suspects.

However, that was not important to Tatsuya.

For him, the most important thing was Maya's safety. If Maya were to die now, it would be inconvenient. As Miyuki has just been revealed as the Yotsuba Family's next Family Head, Tatsuya could no longer be hidden in anonymity behind the scenes.

While he could maintain his position, he had yet to form any stable footing. His only allies were the personnel of the FLT Third Division, Ushiyama and company. Neither Kazama nor Yakumo would want to interfere when it's disadvantageous for them. They couldn't exactly be called ‘Sponsors'.

Maya can be said to be one of the most powerful Magicians in the world. It wasn't a bluff. There was almost no one who could beat her in magic combat. There were no Magicians who wouldn't be harmed by ‘Meteor Shower', even Tatsuya was no exception.

Tatsuya's ‘Decomposition' Magic had good chemistry against Maya's ‘Meteor Shower'. However, Maya's initiation speed was also top-notch, matching her magic power, and she was also able to wield her power with versatility. These were deficits Tatsuya couldn't compensate for. Maya also possessed magic besides just ‘Meteor Shower'. And Tatsuya wouldn't always get the initiative, either. If Maya's ‘Meteor Shower'

were to be activated before his ‘Decomposition', even Tatsuya wouldn't escape unscathed. He was only able to emerge victorious thus far due to ‘Regrowth', and as long as Maya didn't possess that power, she probably wouldn't be able to win against Tatsuya. Once ‘Meteor Shower' was invoked, even the strongest defense magic like ‘Phalanx' from the Juumonji Family wouldn't be able to withstand it.

However, that was only in terms of magic combat strength. Maya's body was only on par with that of a normal human. She had never undergone any special training to maintain her beauty or health, just like any other weak woman. If she were to get cut, she would bleed like anyone else.

No matter how skillful someone was as a Magician, it was impossible to continuously maintain a personal barrier. Continuous defense-type magic hadn't been properly implemented yet, and it was far from practical use. In fact, calling it experimental would be appropriate. For Yotsuba Maya, even a single bullet could threaten her life.

Tatsuya had prepared himself to use ‘Regrowth' in front of public eyes when he had rushed here, but for the time being, he had confirmed Maya's safety. ‘Seems like it'd take some time to be able to talk to her —— though there's nothing in particular to be said —— should I go back to school?' Tatsuya was pondering when suddenly a red uniform came into view.

"Ichijou."

It was quite a loud voice, but not loud enough to be called raucous.

However, Masaki reacted to Tatsuya's tone rather firmly.

"Shiba."

He must have been looking for his father, Gouki. Masaki rapidly took in his surroundings while walking up to Tatsuya.

"Shiba-san, you're here as well."

Gazing at Miyuki who stood beside Tatsuya, Masaki changed his expression; it was a complex mix between disappointment and joy.

Miyuki linked her arm to Tatsuya's —— or not.

They weren't even in close contact.

Rather the gap between Tatsuya and Miyuki had spread even further. However, Masaki perceived that being due to the fact that they had suddenly went from siblings to lovers.

"Yes, this has become quite a problem."

Masaki's emotions weren't hard to read, even for Miyuki. Proposing an engagement towards someone who just announced their own engagement, even if it was out of sheer passion… Masaki's smiling face had a complex, yet easy to understand expression on it.

To be honest, Miyuki was just being timid to keep Masaki from feeling awkward. The Ichijou Family denying her engagement to Tatsuya didn't change her status as Tatsuya's fiancée. Even with that in mind, she still felt miserable when she came to understand her wish might not come true; it was a highly unpleasant feeling.

That being the case, Miyuki wasn't so immature as to make Masaki uncomfortable. Additionally, even though she was unhappy with Masaki's actions, she didn't have any aversion to him as a person. As such, putting on an amiable smile was an easy task to accomplish for her.

Although, it was probably a good idea for Masaki to give up as soon as possible. ——To be honest, even Miyuki desired for him to give up on her as soon as possible.

"Yeah… for the Head of each house to be gathered here…"

Masaki's mood brightened from seeing Miyuki smile at him.

"Yes. The police seem to be questioning them."

"Questioning!? Excuse me. I'm going over first."

Fortunately, his judgement wasn't impaired too much by the unfolding events. As if realizing the impending crisis that the questioning of the

Heads of the Ten Master Clans could create, Masaki regained his original purpose of going to his father's side.

On the other hand, Katsuto came out of the swarm of policemen. He was released early due to consideration of his age as a minor. (In the past, an adult was anyone over 18, but it was reinstated to 20 again. Reduction of the 'of age' limit was required in order to mass mobilize young soldiers during wartime, it was done all around the world. The adult age standard was even reduced to 16 at one point, before being raised to 25 at its extreme.)

Katsuto walked straight over to Tatsuya and company. It seemed like he had seen what Izumi had done just now.

"Shiba."

Since there was no follow up on his words, there was no mistake of whom he had just called. At the very least, Tatsuya thought that Katsuto wouldn't be shameless enough to call Miyuki without the proper honorific.

"Has the police interrogation been completed, Juumonji-senpai?"

Tatsuya directed his attention to Katsuto. Currently, they were standing in front of each other as a Senpai-Kouhai from school, not as members of the Ten Master Clans.

"No, I was thinking of updating you guys on the situation."

Katsuto seemed to take the bait, and the awkwardness in his attitude disappeared.

Katsuto looked around Tatsuya's companions. He knew about Kasumi and Izumi since way back. It was his first meeting with Takuma and Minami, or at least, they had never gotten a proper chance to have a conversation.

"Are you perhaps, Shippou-dono?"

Katsuto spoke to Takuma.

"Yes, I'm Shippou Takuma. Nice to meet you Juumonji-san."

In contrast to Tatsuya, he greeted Katsuto as a member of the Ten Master Clans rather than as a Kouhai from First High. Although there was a difference between their status as a Family Head and the son of a Family Head, since they were standing as members of the Ten Master Clans, they were of equal footing.

"I'm Juumonji Katsuto. Pleased to meet you."

"I as well, nice to meet you, too."

However, even with the equal footing, and without the Senpai-Kouhai formality, Takuma did not make any cheeky gestures, even with his mouth, in their first meeting.

"This girl is Sakurai Minami, a Year 1 student who has been living with us."

Provided the chance, Tatsuya introduced Minami to Katsuto. She politely bowed to Katsuto, and he seemed to have come to the realization that Minami's identity was, to some extent, like that of a Servant of the Yotsuba Family. After responding briefly to Minami, Katsuto returned to his point.

"You guys came here after receiving the disaster notification, didn't you? As you can see, Yotsuba-dono, Saegusa-dono, and Shippou-dono are safe. There are no injuries whatsoever."

The notification he referred to was an email in their mobile information terminals, which stated that his immediate family and acquaintances had encountered a disaster. Mobile information terminals gathered and relayed a lot of helpful information, such as reporting a fire and earthquake alarm in close proximity to the attendees, it had a radio service to inform the recipients of the notification of the recorded destination, and included a life log which monitored the owner's state in three stages; 'safe, danger', and 'death'. This information was supplied alongside local government information emails.

However, the notification was sent right as the disaster occurred, so there was no way to get an update to the situation unless the

transmission was set to be continuous. Masaki, and even Tatsuya, were rushing because of that.

"Seems so. By the way, Senpai, do you mind telling us what exactly happened?"

"Hmm… If the others were here it would be easier to explain, but…"

After hearing Katsuto's words, Tatsuya looked around. Members of the Yotsuba Family could be seen furtively mingling amongst the people as to not stand out, and the Butler Hanabishi who was in charge of the unit was seen spreading his members among the crowd. ——Unfortunately, there was no hint of any suicide bomber to be found.

"Please."

Tatsuya lowered his head, conveying a heartfelt message that he didn't mind even the smallest bits of information. Katsuto nodded and gave a brief account of what happened.

"To be honest, we don't know the details either."

During the meeting, they were attacked by a suicide bomber and went to the roof seeking refuge. Katsuto also mentioned that the suicide bomber had used animated corpses for the attack.

"At this point in time, it's not yet determined that we were the target. Although I believe that there's a high chance that the meeting was targeted, it seems to be inconclusive, even for the police."

"Excuse me, Katsuto-san. No, Juumonji-senpai."

After calling Katsuto by name, Kasumi hurriedly corrected herself to address him as a Senpai. Since her sister knew of Katsuto even before during High School, she recognized him more as her sister's friend instead of as a Senpai from the same High School. ——Kasumi and Izumi probably felt uneasy to call him ‘Katsuto-san' while her sister always called him ‘Juumonji-kun'.

"Kasumi, what is it?"

Likewise, Katsuto felt the same.

"What did the police ask my fath-… no, what are they asking everyone?"

"We were asked to explain since we were at the scene and had witnessed it unfold from the start."

"Then, Otou-sama and the rest aren't under suspicion of being criminals?"

Izumi, who was standing next to Kasumi, had a tense vibe about her. The twins were showing a normal reaction, but Tatsuya and Miyuki were surprised that Izumi seemed to be earnestly worried about her father.

Due to that, Katsuto's eyes had a flicker of hesitation when Kasumi stared at him.

"They're not suspected of any conspiracy. Even so, the police doubt that conflict between magicians could lead to suicide bombing."

Still, he didn't try to dodge Kasumi's question.

"That's…"

While a stunned utterance escaped her mouth, Izumi's hand clenched tightly.

Unreasonable, she was definitely thinking so.

It wasn't just thought by Izumi. Takuma, who had been quietly listening in anger, had also balled his hand into a fist.

"They seem to think like the Anti-Magician faction."

While Tatsuya was famous due to his reputation for controlling his emotions, he couldn't help but vocalize such an ironic observation.

"Onii-sama, could there be officers present that support the ‘Humanists'…?"

Miyuki's words made the faces of the group become sour.

"No, that's not it. If there were any, this interrogation would be much more flagrant."

Tatsuya recalled the relentless interrogation he got from the police in Arashiyama, Kyoto after he fought the Traditionalist Magicians manipulated by Zhou, who detested the Ten Master Clans. He denied Miyuki's concern.

The freshmen seemed visibly relieved by his confirmation. Katsuto lifted his eyebrow, letting out a surprised expression through his eyes.

"Shiba, aren't the two of you cousins, not siblings?"

Before Miyuki got upset, Tatsuya answered that question with a laugh.

"Ah, Miyuki's ‘Onii-sama' is it? Since we'd regarded each other as siblings until recently… as expected, it's hard to immediately adjust."

"I see. Fair enough."

Katsuto's doubt dissipated. This showed that Tatsuya's response was just too natural, rather than Katsuto being gullible. There was no trace of guilt at all, and his act seemed genuine.

"Huh, Aniki?"

Just at that moment, almost too conveniently, Katsuto's attention was taken by Kasumi's loud voice.

"Tomokazu-san, is it?"

Noticing the young man who was waving to Kasumi and Izumi, Katsuto muttered the name of the young man.

"Shiba, do you have anything else you want to ask?"

"No. There's nothing."

"How about you, Shippou?"

"Likewise, I don't have any more questions."

After confirming with Tatsuya and Takuma, Katsuto nodded.

"Then, I'll be excusing myself."

Katsuto proceeded to walk in the direction of the young man.

"Miyuki-senpai, Shiba-senpai."

Immediately, Izumi turned to Tatsuya and spoke.

"It seems like our brother is also waiting, so we'll excuse ourselves. I think we'll be going back with him as well, so don't mind us."

"Shiba-senpai, President, please excuse us. Sakurai-san, you as well."

Subsequently, Kasumi bowed to Tatsuya and followed her twin, waving to Minami as well. The twins went after Tomokazu, the young man whom Katsuto was approaching.

"Onii-sama, that man is related to Izumi-chan and Kasumi?"

Miyuki, upon seeing Tomokazu's back, immediately sought confirmation to Tatsuya.

"Yes. Saegusa Tomokazu-san. The Saegusa Family's eldest son. Izumi and Kasumi's step-brother."

"I see…"

The reason for Miyuki's curiosity was due to the fact that Kasumi called him ‘Aniki' and Izumi referred to him as ‘Ani', and there was no distance felt whatsoever.

"By the way, Onii-sama, about our earlier conversation."

"Ah, the police have yet to be filled with anti-magic ideologies, it seems to be that way. Also, from the way they were talking just now, it seems like a needless concern."

Tatsuya answered so, anticipating Miyuki's question.

"Rather, that was rather lenient of him to say considering the situation."

Adding a sigh to his sentence.

"…Not only anti-magic principles, the police haven't been corrupted with any polluted ideologies. Either of those would be a big problem, no?"

Miyuki gazed towards Tatsuya with a puzzled look as he smiled.

"If there were some officers that had subscribed to the anti-magic ideology, that would be enough to depose them."

Tatsuya explained with a serious look, minding the future possibilities ahead of them.

"At any rate, we don't need to do anything for now. If it's information we want, we can always get it from the police."

"It might seem impossible, but… if the police, as an organization, is taken over by the anti-magician ideology… what are we going to do?"

"It's highly unlikely."

Tatsuya, with a bitter expression, shook his head at Miyuki's question.

"As long as the enemy doesn't develop a method to stand against magic, the magic police are already on standby. Hence, the government would make its move before anything too serious happened, but…"

"Is there any chance that it wouldn't end so favorably?"

The way Miyuki asked Tatsuya did not hide any of the anxiety in her voice.

"Even though there doesn't seem to be a detective here, this terrorist attack is actually being handled well. Most likely due to the Ten Master Clans being involved, they're following up on the matter."

Tatsuya didn't directly answer Miyuki, instead he took a step back to look at the root of the problem instead.

"If an unbiased detective came to a conclusion, there's a high chance the general public would agree with him."

Tatsuya fixed his eyes on Maya.

The Heads of Ten Master Clans were still surrounded by the police.

"Depending on how the media publicized this attack, the reaction could vary greatly. Unfortunately, they'll probably go with 'magicians caused civilian casualties' and the like…"

Tatsuya diverted his gaze to the group of people who were injured. Some were being transferred to the ambulance with serious injuries, and there were only ten people left. Even in such a situation, the number of fatalities hadn't reached double digits. This result could be considered miraculous.

"Even though the terrorist would take full blame for this attack, there would still be a lot of people like myself who would think that 'Magicians caused this, and they have a responsibility for reparations', and inevitably would be convinced this was the truth."

"But, we, Magicians, are also Japanese citizens like them, aren't we…"

Miyuki showed a glimpse of sadness in her eyes.

"However,"

Even so, she didn't look away. Although Miyuki appeared to be fragile, she wasn't timid.

"The media is not always hostile to Magicians. Last April, despite the small number, there was a campaign to acknowledge the rights of Magicians."

As Miyuki said, there was such a campaign discussed in the news last April, to counter the arguments of the media's hostility against magicians.

However, this time, the situation is different. The number of casualties are higher, and the damage was more severe.

"You're right. Even the Ten Master Clans won't be able to sit still now."

Yet, Tatsuya didn't say anything that would increase Miyuki's anxiety. Whether or not he was pessimistic or optimistic about the future, things that are bound to happen will happen anyway. As of now, neither

Miyuki or Tatsuya could do anything. Due to this, Tatsuya refrained from saying anything that could worsen the atmosphere.

"More importantly, we've made sure that Haha-ue is alright, so let's go back to school."

He already confirmed the situation from Katsuto's explanation, and staying longer there wouldn't change things. This situation was better left to the police. Trusting Tatsuya's judgement, Miyuki replied ‘yes, Onii-sama', and Minami also bowed in agreement, following them silently.

"How about you, Shippou?"

"I… will stay here a little longer."

Takuma answered so, when Tatsuya asked him.

"I see."

Tatsuya didn't oppose his decision. He wasn't responsible for taking care of Takuma, and their relationship wasn't that close either. Tatsuya urged Miyuki and Minami to leave the area.

"Umm, Shiba-senpai."

From behind, Takuma's voice could be heard to have hesitation in it.

"What?"

"About our earlier conversation… No, nevermind."

Takuma retracted his words.

It was clear that Takuma was doubting him, but Tatsuya kept his face with ‘I see' expression and turned his back against Takuma.

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The hotel was burnt down, with many injured and many dead.

The ghastly mastermind behind this terrorist attack was observing the aftermath from a house located 9km east of Odawara.

A suicide bombing was the perfect tool for Jiedo Heigu. It inflicted major damage while keeping losses to a minimum.

The explosives didn't get caught by the detectors which had been pre-installed in the city, which was to be expected from a weapon deemed obsolete by the USNA Army. The shields hadn't been activated either since the explosive detectors didn't go off.

Even his corpse puppets which were manipulated with 'Zombification' didn't get discovered by the sensors. His dolls got into the hotel unimpeded.

The security measures in the city were flawed to a laughable degree. In his evaluation, the city he had until recently lived in while in the USNA had much tighter security. He had a sense of self-satisfaction when he thought of this.

Even the Ten Master Clans had been unable to injure him, which had been according to plan. He had expected to be able to escape without a scratch instead of triggering something short of a full war, military infantry and all.

As expected, the Ten Master Clans had only defended themselves, selfishly protecting themselves at the expense of others. If they had used their magic to protect everyone else, the injured count might been curbed at 20 people, and the outcome of 50 he achieved wouldn't have been possible.

They ended up as collateral damage due to the Ten Master Clans.

This was the message Jiedo Heigu wanted to spread to the Japanese.

The Ten Master Clans would abandon ordinary citizens if it was to save themselves.

You, the Japanese, would be killed because of the Ten Master Clans.

The Ten Master Clans, the Yotsuba, I will take away your place in Japan the same way you took mine.

My homeland, where I belonged was Dahan…

Jiedo Heigu smiled in the darkness of his silhouette as he stood up. Strewn about his feet were the owner of the house and his family, laying on the floor lifelessly.

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STARS No. 2, Benjamin Canopus, was currently in a room inside the USNA Embassy. He was staring at the screen relaying the scene of the terrorist attack at Hakone.

His smart and fearless face was colored with a bitter expression. Although they were of different countries, he couldn't help but feel sorry for the civilians who fell victim to terrorism.

As an austere soldier, Canopus believed that military personnel who protected non-combatants and complied with the classic laws of war should be full of pride. STARS missions, however, often required him to operate covertly and break these laws he respected. He was constantly struggling with this inner conflict, and that's why he decided to forgo any involvement with civilians which could affect his heart.

He would have stopped Heigu's attack if it was possible. Unfortunately, he wasn't allowed to reveal the embarrassing weaponry theft to Japan, and in turn this caused Japan to be unprepared for the terrorist attack. This resulted in the unnecessary loss of Japanese civilian's lives.

Since he was not allowed to inform them, he was also ordered to not cooperate with Japan's military or police to further ensure the weapon theft remained a secret.

He had received a kill order for Heigu, and he needed to keep a low profile while doing so, to prevent any intel leakage to the Japanese

authorities. Luring out Heigu to the high seas and eliminating him there was the best possible outcome, or so he was told.

Canopus had a 'soldier to the bones' kind of mentality, but he understood that a command must be obeyed. The moment military personnel deviate from a given order, they would be deemed an outlaw, guilty of insubordination.

It was a smarter choice to follow his orders from the military, lest he be branded a fugitive.

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Eventually, the Heads of the Ten Master Clans were released by the police, and they travelled back to the Kantō Branch Magic Association Building in the helicopter that Masaki was riding. Of course, Katsuto was together with them, as well as the ones who were expected to be with them. This included Kasumi, Izumi, their brother, Kouichi's first son, Tomokazu, and Takuma.

When they arrived at the Magic Association, the Heads of the Ten Master Clans went to a conference room, while Masaki, Kasumi, Izumi, Tomokazu, and Takuma were waiting in a separate room in the building. Despite the fact that it was a sudden announcement, the Magic Association managed to arrange a round table for the Heads of the Ten Master Clans to sit at. They looked at each other's faces, before the eldest of them broke the silence.

"Let's stop wasting time with meaningless prelude. Everybody please voice out ideas, if you have any, on how to deal with this emergency."

Futatsugi Mai, who was the focus of the other nine, stared back at each of them one by one.

After a glance around the table, she held her gaze on Kouichi who was sitting directly across from her.

"It will be difficult to control the mass media."

Kouichi, who had the most influence in the media industry, said that with a gloomy face.

"As of now, there are 16 casualties, but that number might soar above a couple dozen. Just the number of casualties is more than enough to throw the public opinion into a frenzy."

"Even so, it doesn't mean that we can afford to do nothing."

From his seat, Itsuwa Isami stated his opinion. His voice, however, did not carry any strength.

"No, it's probably best to wait for now. An overly controlled public opinion might backfire if done hastily. It might even carry heavier consequences for us."

Mitsuya Gen cast his opinion reluctantly.

"That's right. In the first place, we are also victims, and there's nothing we have done that requires justification. If we react rashly now, there's no guarantee that we wouldn't hurt ourselves."

Yatsushiro Raizou consented.

"However, standing still without taking any action also wouldn't be a wise decision. This isn't our only problem. The whole population of Magicians is also under scrutiny."

"I agree with Ichijou-dono. We shouldn't overdo our counter-measure, but we definitely cannot stay still. If we do not resist, we will end up being cornered by our enemy."

Gouki and Mutsuzuka Atsuko insisted that they should take aggressive measures. The meeting had barely started, but the mood had started to break down early on. Mai furrowed her eyebrows in concern, and she urged those who had yet to comment to join the discussion.

"Juumonji-dono, how about you? Please don't hold back, and feel free to speak your mind."

Katsuto lowered his head to the others before he started to talk.

"It's probably impossible to try to control the mass media. I agree with Saegusa-dono on that."

Unexpectedly, he started with such a flat statement.

"Then, is it better for us to do nothing?"

Interestingly enough, Raizou showed a rather surprised expression.

"No."

Katsuto focused his eyes at Raizou, without even moving his neck.

"Let's not resort to such tricks, I believe we should openly declare our position. Particularly, in condemning the terrorist attacks against the Magic Association."

"I see."

Raizou nodded, he was clearly caught unprepared. He was so focused on what was in his hand that he had overlooked the straightforward approach.

"I believe that Juumonji-dono's suggestion is the most realistic countermeasure we can take as of this moment."

Shippou Takumi gave consent to Katsuto's proposal.

"Ah, I also think that making a statement through the Magic Association is a good solution."

Raizou said so while slightly raising his hand.

"Yatsushiro-dono, isn't that only an excuse to escape from giving your idea?"

Atsuko brewed some tea.

The unscrupulous Gouki frowned at the remark, yet the object of the remark, Raizou, was laughing in a carefree manner.

"Yotsuba-dono, what do you say."

As a gesture of goodwill to Raizou, and to divert the attention from himself, Atsuko swiftly directed a question to Maya.

Maya, rather than focusing on answering Atsuko, opened her mouth towards Kouichi who was sitting by her side.

"I don't think we have much choice here. Am I right, Saegusa-dono?"

"That's true."

Kouichi nodded with a straight face towards Maya's statement, even though it sounded like a provocation.

"So, we will put out a statement via the Magic Association that condemns this attack, and we will also state our intent to fully cooperate in catching the perpetrator."

After he made sure that nobody was against his statement, Kouichi opened his mouth again.

"Of course, this will involve control of the mass media."

"However, didn't you say yourself that exerting such control would be difficult, Saegusa-dono?"

Being reminded by Gen about what he said, Kouichi nodded and faked a smile.

"Yes, we will be unable to do anything about those who claim the responsibility is purely on us Magicians, but we can't afford being passive about this. In the end, the bad guys are the terrorists, and I believe continually inducing this impression while controlling the media is the optimal solution."

Gen didn't give any reply to Kouichi.

"I wonder if things would go so smoothly. Once public opinion goes against Magicians, it won't be easy to overturn it."

"The hostile atmosphere towards Magicians has existed for a long time. However, by diverting attention to the terrorist, we can at least ease the increasing negative opinion towards Magicians. If we also cooperate in

catching the criminal, the terrorist becomes the scapegoat, and the hostility aimed at us for this incident should vanish."

"Capturing the terrorist with our own hands? Wouldn't that impose a greater risk for us?"

Gouki interrupted the discussion between Kouichi and Gen.

"In order for us, the Heads of the Ten Master Clans to move, we need military approval. Although that's only a verbal agreement and not a written rule, we should not disregard the procedures that have been given to us in order to maintain a relationship with the government."

"Ichijou-dono, you do know that such a permit from the military has a very low chance of being accepted, right?"

Gouki shook his head in reply to Kouichi's question. He also implied ‘that's not all'.

"If we allow for a second and third attack to be carried out during our search, the public opinion of the Ten Master Clans, no, of Magicians will suffer even more."

"However, that doesn't mean we'll just idly sit around while the terrorist attacks us."

Maya's intervention, was met with surprises. Since she directly replied to Gouki, with her eyes fixed on him.

"In order to catch the criminal, and to prevent a copycat attack, I think we must dispose of our mask and mobilize our strength. The Ten Master Clans have the power to catch the criminal."

If this statement hadn't been made by Maya, who openly supported Kouichi, people might have had an easier time accepting it.

"However, I can understand Ichijou-dono's concern."

"…What do you mean?"

Gouki wasn't the only one who stared at Maya with a puzzled look. Kouichi also reflected a quizzical expression towards Maya in his eyes.

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to be directly involved in the search of this attacker. Although letting the perpetrator remain at large is a problem in itself, I still think it's a necessity for us to be on the lookout for another terrorist attack for now."

"So we should focus on preventing another attack from being carried out?"

Maya nodded, to answer Mai's question.

"Then, should we assign someone to keep an eye out for the terrorist?"

Atsuko's question wasn't meant for only Maya, but also towards the other members who were in the meeting.

"I'm sending Tatsuya from my family."

Maya, however, seemed to misunderstand the question as something aimed at the Yotsuba Family.

"Let's give the responsibility to Masaki."

As if to compete, Gouki quickly threw in Masaki's name.

"Yotsuba-dono, Ichijou-dono, please wait a minute."

However, in exchange of the nominations from their own families, Mai seemed to be unsatisfied.

"The nominees you have both put forward are still in high school. To be on the lookout for a hidden criminal will take a lot of time and effort. Even if they are a part of the Ten Master Clans, ultimately, they're still students. I don't think it's wise to sacrifice their academics for this matter."

Gouki's hot-bloodedness was rebutted by the common sense that came from Mai.

"It's heartwarming to hear your concern, Futatsugi-dono. However, you need not worry."

However, Maya returned a calm smile to Mai.

"You are correct in saying that locating a terrorist and his colleagues may take a long time, but if Tatsuya receives backup from the Yotsuba family, he won't even need a month to remove the terrorists. That wouldn't be enough to disrupt his schooling."

She replied with a strong degree of confidence, as if she could foresee the future. Mai was taken aback by Maya's statement.

"…But still."

However, the opponent was someone from the Ten Master Clans as well. Mai was not so easily trusting what Maya said.

"The fact that Tatsuya-dono is still a high school student is undeniable. No matter the degree to which your family supports him, chasing a terrorist isn't a good idea, right?"

Maya replied to Mai's statement with a slight smile as if seemingly saying, "Well, you're too late."

The terrorist attack that had happened a year ago, in April of 2095, had been covered up well till now. The information had been released to the Ten Master Clans, previously.

They still had no hints about Tatsuya's magic, but it was clear to them that Tatsuya and Katsuto were the ones who defeated the criminals. The record of events that transpired was held by the Juumonji Family, and was given to the Ten Master Clans once the Yotsuba Family announced that Tatsuya was a member of their family.

Although the assassination of the ringleader of No Head Dragon was kept a secret, Tatsuya's involvement in the Yokohama Incident at the International Conference Center was already out of the bag. There was also the Parasite Incident which had been uncovered. Maya even spoke about the matter of Zhou Gongjin last fall. It was plain to see Tatsuya being a high school student hadn't stopped his participation in other dangerous events.

"Shall my eldest son, Tomokazu, lead the operation against the terrorists?"

The one who suddenly threw in his idea into the stalled atmosphere was Kouichi.

"My eldest has already completed his education, and his work hours can be adjusted. We can start looking around Hakone for preliminary clues left by the terrorist. The Kantō-Izu region is, after all, under the jurisdiction of the Saegusa Family."

Kouichi glanced around the table to see the others' reactions.

"If you cannot believe me after my involvement with Zhou Gongjin, Juumonji-dono, you are welcome to take the lead, while Tomokazu can assist you."

Everyone's expressions showed puzzlement, unable to comprehend what Kouichi wanted to achieve with this.

"…Are you, perhaps, trying to pay for your mistake?"

Mai had eye contact with Maya, as well as Gen, to see if they had figured out what Kouichi meant.

Kouichi meekly nodded.

"Of course I don't expect to regain your trust with only this much, but I would like to think that this is the first step to do so."

"Isn't that a fine idea."

Maya looked at Kouichi, and showed her support for him.

"After all, Kantō is Saegusa-dono's and Juumonji-dono's territory. If Saegusa-dono has decided to move, then I will be happy enough to leave it to you."

Maya said so while smiling at Mai.

"If everyone agrees with this plan, then I will take the responsibility upon myself."

The one who responded to that smile was not Mai, but Katsuto.

"If you need any form of help from Tatsuya, please don't hold back."

"Likewise. Regardless of the form, if you ever need a hand from Ichijou-dono, we'll be there."

"Of course, I will not spare any resource. You can also mobilize Masaki as you like."

Lowering his head to Gouki and Maya, Katsuto turned to Kouichi.

"Saegusa-dono. Formally, I will be responsible, however, I plan to leave command to Tomokazu-dono."

"Thank you very much."

Kouichi carefully bowed to Katsuto who is young enough to be his own child.

"However."

But, Katsuto's sentence had yet to end.

"The Yotsuba Family's Tatsuya-dono and the Ichijou Family's Masaki will cooperate under my command."

Kouichi narrowed his eyes sharply for an instant. Nobody noticed this though, as he was wearing his sunglasses even though he was indoors.

"I do not comprehend your reason, but I do not mind it."

Kouichi nodded towards Katsuto.

This time, Katsuto bowed calmly at Kouichi.

"Then, concluding this discussion, we will deliver a message via the Magic Association that condemns the terrorist attack. We will also assign Juumonji-dono and Saegusa-dono to cooperate in apprehending the terrorist."

Mai reconfirmed the conclusion of the discussion to the others.

Even so, Raizou quickly interrupted.

"I'm not against any of that, but I wonder if their base is even in Japan at all."

He decided to point out that the corpse manipulation technique was foreign,

"Unmistakably."

Gouki denied flatly.

"The corpse manipulation technique is not one that can be programmed beforehand to activate later on. At the very least, in order to control that many corpses to such a degree, someone nearby must be controlling them."

"How close would that be?"

Gouki stopped to think for a while before answering Isami.

"Depending on the Magician's skill, the furthest would be 10 kilometers."

Then, he added on.

"We should assume the Magician in question does not have a very high degree of skill."

"We can't help but hope that's the case, can we?"

From his side, Katsuto stated so plainly.

"If our opponent is really that skilled, we probably wouldn't be able to capture him anyway."

"That's right. I think it's better to form a general strategy to capture him."

Raizou expressed his support to Mai's plan about forming a strategy.

As if a trigger was pulled, the others were voicing out their support one after another.

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After the meeting concluded, the unscheduled conference room was emptied.

Each of the Family Heads went home immediately. They needed to strengthen their vigilance in their own regions in order to prevent another terrorist attack.

Even though they were 'in charge' of the region, it wasn't as if the Ichijou Family, whose stronghold was in the Hokuriku-San'in, could perform a thorough monitoring. They couldn't prevent any high-level magic crime happening in the Tōhoku Region either. The Ten Master Clans, in their respective regions, have their own worries to deal with regarding the aftermath of the attack.

The ones who were responsible for preventing terrorist attacks were the police, while the Ten Master Clans were only supposed to cooperate. However, in order to ensure proper cooperation, the role of the Family Head was indispensable. ——As for the Yotsuba Family, even when the help they could provide was unknown, it would be a pain to actually mobilize without the Family Head coordinating it.

Due to that reason, each Family Head was rushing back to their own homes.

Not even Ichijou Gouki and Masaki were exempt, as they were rushing back to Kanazawa on a helicopter.

"Masaki."

After taking off from the Magic Association heliport, they went North-West, and Gouki started a conversation with his son.

"Yes."

From his tone, Masaki understood that he was talking as a Family Head, and not in a parent-child relationship, thus, Masaki replied formally.

"The meeting we just concluded was regarding how we will handle the terrorist attack."

"Yes."

"The Ten Master Clans will issue a statement condemning this act of terrorism, and we will also be searching for the mastermind. Juumonji-dono has been put in charge, and Saegusa's eldest son, Saegusa Tomokazu-dono will be assisting him."

"What will the Ichijou Family's role be?"

"The Ten Master Clans is led by Juumonji-dono to prevent another terrorist attack. Masaki, you'll be assisting Juumonji-dono in this."

"Yes."

Masaki straightened his back and answered. His face was filled with excitement instead of nervousness. For Masaki, the role of catching the terrorist mastermind was an honorable one.

"Of course, you'll need to take a little time off from school, this includes the upcoming public holiday. I will settle this with the principal."

"Understood."

Masaki had quite an attachment to his school life. The truth was, he didn't want to take time off. However, his responsibility towards the Ten Master Clans weighed greater on him.

Masaki's face was already stiff, but it froze as soon as he heard Gouki's next words.

"Shiba Tatsuya of the Yotsuba Family will join the group under Juumonji-dono. Masaki, make me proud."

"Yes."

Masaki nodded with a strong fighting spirit.

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The events of February 5th, 2097 were coming to an end.

After rushing to the site of the terrorist attack, Tatsuya and Miyuki (and Minami), were taking a break at home.

Tatsuya was relieved that Maya was safe, but tomorrow's criticism would be harsher than ever. Yet, he couldn't deny that it was driven by the mood of the people.

He also felt an average amount of anger towards the terrorist.

Tatsuya also learned how to show condolence towards the victims and survivors.

His true relief came from the fact that Miyuki was not targeted this time.

Regarding this incident, Tatsuya had no desire to be involved. As expected from him, so long as Miyuki was not in harm's way, he would be content. Also, the worries he had for Maya were from considering Miyuki's feelings.

Lower on his priority list was First High. If it ever got attacked though, even Tatsuya may not be able to ignore it.

Apart from things like that though, such as the attack targeting the Master Clans Conference, Tatsuya had no reason to voluntarily move.

Well, as long as he was not ordered to.

To keep the thoughts about the terrorist out of his mind, Tatsuya taught Miyuki the challenges of magic science application in her room. Before long, he was interrupted by the sound of the telephone. However, before Miyuki could pick up the phone, the 'answer' button changed. Either Minami had picked up the phone, or the current call wasn't intended for Miyuki. It could also have been the contact number for the house being changed.

Just as Tatsuya moved his attention away from the phone, it rang again. This time it was the sound of a forwarded call.

"Yes."

Miyuki pressed the receiver button and talked through the mic.

"Miyuki-sama, the Family Head wants to talk to Tatsuya-sama."

Minami said so from the other end.

"Understood. We'll go to the living room."

After giving instructions to Minami, Tatsuya rose and proceeded to the living room without any hint of surprise on his face. Miyuki followed right behind him.

"Sorry to make you wait, Oba-ue."

Tatsuya immediately bowed while saying so in front of the screen, even with Minami in the room. In front of others, Tatsuya might have needed to address Maya as ‘Haha-ue', but if he was with an insider, then he'd call her ‘Oba-ue'. He had noted that Minami hadn't announced to anyone that Tatsuya and Maya are not parent and child, but rather aunt and nephew. However, since it was a secret from everyone else, it was better not to say too much.

"I, too, am sorry for calling at such a late hour."

"No, I was still in the middle of studying."

Against Tatsuya's honest answer, Maya was laughing.

"Even Tatsuya-san needs to study, huh."

It was not a fake laugh. Maya seemed to be earnestly happy.

"Despite what I do, I'm still a high school student, so I can't neglect my studies."

Tatsuya answered seriously, hinting to Maya that she should get to the point.

"…Certainly, as a student, your first priority should be studying. It's a pity that I can't let you be devoted to such an activity."

Maya changed her expression from laughing happily to a smirk from the other side of the screen, as Tatsuya observed.

Tatsuya automatically straightened up, prepared to listen to her order.

"Tatsuya-san, I need you to arrest the mastermind of today's terrorist attack."

"Arrest? Not to kill?"

"Ah, the way I phrased myself wasn't very clear. The terrorist's life doesn't matter. Find him, and make him harmless."

"Understood, Oba-ue."

Tatsuya immediately bowed. He didn't give a military salute as he was facing a civilian. He replied with ‘understood', instead of ‘mission accepted', but as expected, the influence of the Independent Magic Battalion was visible.

In the first place, even if he had given a military salute, Maya wouldn't have cared.

"It was the Master Clans Conference's conclusion. The leader will be Juumonji-dono, but the main force will come from the Saegusa Family."

"Then, am I also going to be under command of the Saegusa Family?"

"No. Juumonji-dono has requested that Tatsuya-san is to cooperate directly with him."

Maya casually dropped a bombshell.

"When I say Juumonji-dono, I am talking about Katsuto-san. He has become the new head as of the Master Clans Conference."

However, it didn't seem to detonate as expected.

"I see."

"Oh dear, you don't seem to be surprised."

"The Independent Magic Battalion had heard two years ago that Juumonji-senpai was going to inherit the title of Head."

"Hmm… seems like I must be alert of the military's intelligence network. Or, is it because of that lady's power?"

Maya was referring to Fujibayashi Kyouko. Maya was well acquainted with Kyouko's power as the ‘Electron Sorceress'.

Suddenly, Maya focused her eyes.

"Ichijou Masaki-san will join Tatsuya-san in cooperating under Juumonji-dono's command to capture the terrorist."

"Ichijou-san!?"

That bomb was about the size of a firecracker, but it was still quite a nuisance for Miyuki, who stood beside Tatsuya.

"Pardon my rudeness."

After raising her voice, Miyuki asked for forgiveness with a meek voice and blushing face.

"I don't mind. It was unavoidable that you'd be surprised."

Maya gave her forgiveness through the screen.

Not to say that she was proceeding at her own pace, but Miyuki voiced out a question that she had in mind for Maya.

"About the earlier topic, what about school? Juumonji-sama's operation to catch the terrorist will be conducted in Kantō, right? I don't think it's something that can be settled within a week's time."

Maya laughed and smiled widely on the other side of the screen, after hearing Miyuki's question.

"It won't take that much time. Since we already know the name of the culprit, the opponent must be quite powerless."

Tatsuya was surprised by this news. For Maya to already know something like this was a big deal. She knew who the mastermind was, while Tatsuya didn't even know the reason behind the attack.

"The name of the mastermind is Gu Jie. His english name is Jiedo Heigu. He was the former leader of the Kunlunfang Institute of Dahan. When the Kunlunfang Institute was destroyed, he seemed to have

escaped death. His appearance is of a man in his 50s with a dark/black body and white hair. Well, appearances can always be changed."

The image that Maya gave was consistent with Lina's information. Perhaps, they have the same source, Tatsuya thought.

"Do you know his face?"

"I don't know that much."

Even so, it was still a lead, such was Tatsuya's thought. Maya said that she knew the name of the perpetrator, but names could be changed anytime. It was very optimistic of her to think that the search could be ended soon.

Tatsuya didn't express this, but Miyuki was confused instead.

"You don't have to be that worried, Miyuki-san. At any rate, we can get a hold of a rough location by foretelling here."

Apparently, there were Magicians of the Yotsuba Family that Tatsuya didn't know about. Someone with time regression (post-cognition) or a residual mind-tracking (psychometry) ability seemed to exist in their ranks. Tatsuya interpreted the magic ‘fortune-telling' as such. The Kuroba Family already had such an unusual intelligence capability, and now throwing that kind of magic into the mix… Tatsuya was reminded again that he still didn't know much about the Yotsuba Family.

However, now was not the time to think of such things.

"Tatsuya-san's role comes into play here. Once you meet him, he can't escape your eyes, right?"

"Zhou Gongjin almost slipped through… but I will do my best with my limited ability."

Tatsuya focused himself on the task given by Maya from the other side of the screen and reverently bowed.

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After concluding her call with Tatsuya, Maya put down the phone with an expressionless look.

Hayama was standing behind her as he usually did.

Maya opened her mouth to talk to her butler, despite not looking at his face.

"Hayama-san, have you found any leads?"

"Nothing as of now, my lady."

"I see."

Maya showed vague signs of irritation to Hayama's answer. She hadn't shown this side of her when she called Tatsuya, nor during meeting in front of the other Heads of the Ten Master Clans.

Realizing this, Hayama didn't say 'don't be rash'. The memory of all those casualties wouldn't be washed away within 3-4 days, and Maya would also be aware of that.

"My lady, do you regret that you didn't act upon the information which Colonel Balance provided?"

Instead of calming his master down, Hayama asked about the reason behind Maya's anxiety.

Maya responded with a long and rough sigh reflexively.

"…There's no escaping you, Hayama-san."

Maya showed a small, tired smile, instead of irritation.

"Despite receiving a warning ahead of time, the enemy still managed to score an attack."

It was expected for her to be exhausted. On top of the evacuation after the terrorist attack, followed by the unscheduled Master Clans Conference, she was also held for questioning by the police in the process.

Maya was an excellent Magician, but her body was just like any other woman's. She didn't only look young on the outside, she had maintained her youth for her whole body. However, even a 30-year-old lady has her own limit in the level of activity she can withstand.

"My lady, I understand your feelings, but even if you are irritated or become anxious like this, the Yotsuba Family isn't invincible."

Physical fatigue reduces mental vitality, but it's also a sign that one's body needs rest. If she didn't realize this herself, then there was a need for other people to point this out to help her.

"…You're right. Although we can find them in no time, it's not as if we can find them today or tomorrow, so let's rest for the night."

Fortunately, Maya's mental state wasn't so bad as to forsake the need for rest.

"If something happens, please update me tomorrow morning."

"Please leave it to me, my lady."

Hayama bowed reverently, and left Maya in her study.

Chapter 7

February 6th. A night had passed since the terror attack.

It was drizzling even before dawn, but Tatsuya went to Kokonoe Temple, as per his routine.

He received a rough welcome from the disciples, as per his routine.

However, Tatsuya broke his regular morning routine today, acting oddly towards Yakumo.

"Please teach me how to break Ghost Walker…"

Although Tatsuya asked Yakumo to teach him, he wasn't exactly Yakumo's disciple.

Yakumo also wasn't paid anything.

Yakumo was basically only accompanying Tatsuya during his practice. Although originally he did it due to Kazama's request, recently Tatsuya's skills had been developing so well that he could serve as Yakumo's practice opponent.

During the Parasite Incident, when Yakumo cooperated to perfect Tatsuya's Far Strike, that was due to the fact that Yakumo couldn't stand aside regarding the parasites. Hence, they shared common interests.

Sometimes, Yakumo would help with the investigations for his own amusement.

Lending his temple's underground facility was also because he had no use for it.

"Tatsuya-kun, I've helped you in various ways, but I have never taught you a technique. I think you understand my reasons for doing so?"

"Of course I understand. I'm not a disciple of Kokonoe Temple."

Yakumo glared at him coldly, and Tatsuya shot back with a blank stare. He knew best what kind of relationship he had with Yakumo. Needless to say, he was well aware that Yakumo wouldn't falter even if Tatsuya

asked him to do this. However, this was a necessary measure to catch his opponent who might be able to use Ghost Walker.

Tatsuya wouldn't miss anything once he saw it, Maya had said so herself. Even so, Tatsuya knew that she was overestimating his ability. Considering his current ability, Zhou Gongjin's Ghost Walker was impossible to crack with his own power.

Had Zhou Gongjin not fought with Nakura Saburou prior, Tatsuya would have missed him. He managed to break through Zhou's Ghost Walker because of the blood needles that Nakura Saburou had cast in exchange for his life.

The news didn't reach Lina nor Maya, but there is a high chance that Jiedo Heigu was instructing Zhou Gongjin. Jiedo Heigu was the mastermind of ‘Blanche' and ‘No Head Dragon', according to one of the ‘Seven Sages', Raymond S. Clark's recorded video. Then, Zhou Gongjin who had guided both ‘Blanche' and ‘No Head Dragon', without a doubt, was controlled by Jiedo Heigu as well.

A teacher isn't always better than his student, in fact, there are students who can master a technique better than their teacher. However, Tatsuya was not so naive as to think that the teacher couldn't do something that the student could. At the very least, he thought that he needed to prepare a countermeasure.

Tatsuya threw himself into the fire so readily, yet Yakumo had a rather bland reply.

"Well, you are not a wandering Buddhist monk, nor are you a true shinobi. Currently, you are but an outsider. I can't really teach a technique to an outsider."

"If the way to counter it isn't magic, would it still be counted as confidential?"

Confidential, what a modern word. Yakumo smiled as he heard that, however he immediately wiped that expression from his face.

"As long as I don't directly teach it to you, it wouldn't be counted as a breach… anyways, Tatsuya-kun, do you plan on defeating Ghost Walker without using magic?"

Yakumo's stare penetrated his soul, but Tatsuya stared back at him, not shaken in the least.

"You know my magic is completely one sided, Master. Even if you teach me some complicated combat magic, unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to use it."

"I wouldn't think so, since you're handicapped in regards to Modern Magic. However, in terms of ‘spirit' you are on par with people who are much older than you. I think you have a high chance of being compatible with Ancient Magic."

"The operating principle of Ancient Magic and Modern Magic is the same though."

"The fact that magic rewrites event phenomenon is the same in both Modern and Ancient Magic. However, from our point of view, letting technology rewrite the events for us isn't a 'technique'. Within martial arts hides secrets besides just altering an event, such as control over the 'flow' and 'wave' caused by the 'spirit'. This can allow you to manipulate, disrupt, and terminate."

"…Master, by ‘spirit' you mean a Psion stream, right? ‘Wave' is the Psion wave… And ‘flow' is the channeling of Psions?"

"Hmm, you've learnt well. That's about right."

Yakumo slightly opened his eyes which were sparkling mysteriously.

At that moment, Tatsuya found himself in a dimension without a discernable top or bottom, a foreign and weightless space with no orientation or identifiable directions.

"For us, there is a technique that can manipulate ‘spirit' in the arcane. To realize a technique that can break Ghost Walker, ultimately just needs to manipulate ‘spirit', too."

Yakumo's voice squeezed Tatsuya from all directions.

Without being able to discern a safe foothold in this space, Tatsuya would be unable to avoid an attack.

If you're unsure of your opponent's location, it would be impossible to dodge or even defend yourself.

He was able to see Yakumo. However, he couldn't trust his senses in this situation, thus resisting would be meaningless.

This time, his trust in Yakumo was irrelevant.

In front of an opponent who could decide his life or death, a strong sense of danger forced him to concentrate on his power.

Tatsuya focused on his body, his consciousness divided within.

His blood flowed as usual, and the sensation he felt was similar to a free-fall, but not quite the same. His head could feel gravity properly, and his feet were firm beneath him. Tatsuya's body was seized by a Psion wave before instincts kicked in, breaking away from the illusion of that non-oriented dimension.

The rest of his body could feel gravity acting on it again.

His legs were properly positioned, and his head faced the sky.

"Master, just now…"

"I didn't tell you anything. Well, well, I certainly don't expect that you would break through that illusion with your own strength."

Yakumo kept his mysterious expression while facing away from Tatsuya.

"Even Kazama-kun wasn't able to break through that at first."

"Was that Ghost Walker just now?"

Yakumo acted like he wanted to divert the conversation into idle talk, but he still answered Tatsuya's blunt question with "It's different".

"Ghost Walker is a technique that can affect ‘a squadron of troops'. What I showed you was a mere individual illusion technique."

Then, Yakumo wore a mischievous smile on his face.

"In the first place, it's hard to put you under an illusion, even for me. I managed to do it because I twisted it a little bit."

Yakumo didn't say what kind of twist he had applied. Tatsuya tried to ask him, but his attention was diverted to Yakumo's next sentence.

"In a general sense, that technique you just witnessed could be considered a primitive version of Ghost Walker."

Tatsuya concluded that Yakumo's slip of tongue just now was his answer to his request, ‘please teach me a way to counter Ghost Walker'.

Tatsuya still didn't know how to make use of the mechanism he had just figured out from that illusion, but if that was a primitive version of Ghost Walker, he had a good start. From here on, he could only practice on his own.

"——Master, thank you very much."

"I told you I didn't really teach you anything. More importantly, let's start sparring."

Yakumo prompted the usual routine of theirs.

"I'm under your guidance."

Tatsuya bowed as he spoke, and took his stance as usual.

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After all that happened, Tatsuya returned from his sparring with Yakumo to his daily routine.

As usual, he went to school. However, since he had received an order from Maya regarding the terrorist, he was also waiting for information.

Even so, his life passed smoothly until the lunch break.

Since Miyuki and Honoka's cold war had been resolved, Tatsuya and company were once again seen having lunch at the canteen. Today, as per the norm, the other members were making sure that Miyuki, Honoka, and Shizuku had their seats.

Just as they started their lunch, a large TV started to display urgent news.

"The Terrorist's criminal statement?"

Mikihiko muttered with furrowed eyebrows. In the meantime, the newscaster started reading a statement from his paper.

——Yesterday, the ones who struck the hotel in Hakone was us.

——We will wage a holy war in order to annihilate this demonic power called magic from Earth.

——Yesterday's attack was targeted towards the ringleaders of Magicians in this country, the Ten Master Clans.

——However, the despicable Ten Master Clans managed to escape while using civilians as their shields.

——We will continue to fight to liberate humanity from the control of these mutants who claim to be Magicians.

——Until the Japanese banish Magicians, victims will continue to fall.

To summarize, the content of the elaborate statement was as such.

The caster then proceeded to conclude the damage status of yesterday's terror bomb attack.

Amongst the 89 guests of the hotel, 22 are deceased, and 34 were injured.

He mentioned that 33 people were saved, 27 of which were Magicians.

The caster added that no Magicians were killed or injured. He also included that the magicians should've prioritized saving human lives over escaping, and the casualties could've been kept to a minimum in that situation.

"What do they mean by saying that we should have prioritized saving the lives of others over our own."

Erika spitefully rebutted the politician covered by the news. Not that she was complaining to the TV —— she knew that the display was not a communication line —— it didn't have a two-way communication function.

"There are some professions where you must protect others first, but it's unpleasant to have that kind of ideology shoved down our throats."

Mikihiko had an unusually strong tone, showing that he couldn't tolerate the newscaster's stance.

"The terrorists consisted of about 50 people, right? How can they expect the Ten Master Clans to prevent something like that? Do they actually think we're some sort of super humans?"

Leo's face showed how appalled he was by the caster's comments.

"Helping each other is necessary in times of distress, yes, but they can't just shift the priority of people's lives around to get a heartwarming story. He implied that our lives, Magician's lives, aren't as valuable."

Tatsuya didn't stop at irony, he actually went on to criticize the newscaster with his flat tone.

The group fell silent, most likely wanting to avoid adding any more comments. They just continued to listen to the broadcast quietly.

The remarks from the politicians were full of terrorist-blaming. If they tried to blame the Ten Master Clans on their own at this moment, the fallout would've played directly into the terrorist's hands. Even

considering just adding the politicians who were critical of the magic community, their forces had been increasing steadily due to the attack.

However, the words blurted by the newscaster a short while ago in his justice-laden tone, would reverberate in the future. When that happened, the terrorists would definitely capitalize on the magic-hating politicians. Not just Tatsuya, but the entire group's mood grew heavy as they recalled last April's incident, and how it could possibly happen again.

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Tonight, Tatsuya had been invited to the Juumonji Family's manor.

Even if it was called manor, it was only a little bigger than a 21st century mansion. It was bigger than Tatsuya's current house, but it was incomparable to Shizuku's house. Although the yard was large enough that you'd never expect to see something like it in Tokyo.

"You've arrived. Come in."

Tatsuya pushed the doorbell by the gate, and Katsuto came out in person soon after. He already heard from Maya that Katsuto had taken over as the Juumonji Family's Head. Seeing that a family head greeted his own guest, Tatsuya was lost in his thoughts of whether Katsuto perhaps only had a small number of servants, or that he was regarded as an important guest. Whichever it was, Tatsuya decided that it was a favorable act and shelved his questions.

"Excuse me."

The entrance wasn't particularly grandiose, but it was plenty wide. It had about two times the size of the usual entrance you'd find in a house. There wasn't any special furniture, and the only thing that caught Tatsuya's attention were the well-arranged ladies heels.

According to the media, the Juumonji Family has a second son who is a secondary school sophomore, a third son who is a freshman in secondary

school, and a 5-year-old daughter who is in primary school under Katsuto. Tatsuya thought that there was another guest who came before him. He felt that he might know who the person was, but he didn't voice out his deduction to Katsuto.

Katsuto guided him to their destination, but it was more like Tatsuya followed right behind him. Of course, as he had guessed, a girl was seated there to greet him.

"Good evening, Tatsuya-kun. You've come right on time."

Mayumi was sitting on the sofa, and she rotated in her seat to greet Tatsuya.

"Long time no see, Senpai. We haven't been in contact since the end of October."

"You're right. About 3 months maybe? Was it long, or short?"

"Let's not continue our conversation while standing. Shiba, please take a seat first."

Tatsuya accepted Mayumi's invitation to sit on the same sofa as her. Since the sofa was for three people, there was enough space for a single person between Tatsuya and Mayumi.

Katsuto didn't sit in front of Mayumi, but opposite of Tatsuya.

After the three had settled down, silence reigned over the room as they stared at each other to decide who would speak first. After a short moment, someone knocked on the door.

A 60-year-old-ish lady emerged from the other side of the door.

"I've prepared the tea."

She neatly put a saucer and teacup in front of Tatsuya. She also refilled the teacups in front Mayumi and Katsuto before bowing and excused herself from the room.

"What an elegant lady."

Tatsuya voiced his thoughts. She wasn't a beauty when compared to his sister, but her actions and movements showed the experience she had. Miyuki couldn't even compare to this woman.

"Shiba, Saegusa, sorry for troubling you with coming down here today."

Katsuto didn't reply to Tatsuya's murmur.

Although upon observation, it could be seen that he was being bashful.

Tatsuya felt that Mayumi, who was sitting beside him, seemed quite anxious.

"No, the distance between our places isn't that far"

In reality, Tatsuya's home and the Juumonji's household are about 30 km apart in straight line, but he was trying to cover up for Juumonji before Mayumi burst out in laughter. Tatsuya tried to create a serious atmosphere.

It seemed to work, as Mayumi switched to a more serious expression.

"Since Tatsuya-kun has already arrived, Juumonji-kun, would you mind proceeding to the main topic?"

After Mayumi asked this, Katsuto's expression seemed to be strained. This was the first time Tatsuya had seen him like this.

"I want to borrow your power to investigate yesterday's terrorist attack"

Tatsuya had expected this request from Katsuto. Yet, it was still quite surprising to hear from him.

"I have received an order to assist you from the Head of the Yotsuba, so I will definitely cooperate."

Tatsuya answered his part and glanced to Mayumi.

She was quiet, while Katsuto stared at her with an unreadable expression.

"However, why Saegusa-senpai as well? I heard that the Saegusa Family's first son is also conducting an investigation of the terrorist?"

"Shiba. Unfortunately, I cannot answer that question."

Katsuto then looked at Mayumi's face.

"Saegusa. This is not a request from the Juumonji Family to the Saegusa Family's eldest daughter. It's a request as a friend. That's why you don't need to consider your family's situation. If you're not up to it, you may also decline my request."

Mayumi sighed softly. The nuance behind it hinted that she was amazed by his request.

"Juumonji-kun, that's not very fair. If you ask 'as a friend', how am I supposed to reject it?"

"Hmm, I see. Sorry."

"You don't look sorry at all though…"

"No, I don't have any such intentions to…"

Katsuto winced under the suspecting eyes of Mayumi. The scene before Tatsuya's eyes was so novel that it felt quite refreshing.

Katsuto realized that Tatsuya was staring at him and Mayumi, so he then cleared his throat.

"Then, what do you want me to do, Juumonji-kun? I can't accept with just ‘borrow your power'. If it's something I can't do, I won't be able to accept your request."

"Well, that's true."

Katsuto put his fingers on his chin, thinking of how to explain the situation to Mayumi.

"The investigation method of the recent terrorist attack has been decided to follow an untraditional system."

"I am aware. Juumonji-kun, you'll be responsible for carrying out the investigation, but my brother will be taking the lead, right? How inefficient. I don't think it's the right time to get involved with other houses."

It seemed like Mayumi understood well enough that in the Kantō region, the Juumonji Family and the Saegusa Family need to use such an irregular structure in order to coordinate between the two families.

There was another reason involved, but Katsuto had no way of telling this to her. Even though it was Mayumi, there was no way he could say 'this is all due to your father's disloyalty'.

"Yes. When Tomokazu-dono and my group acted independently, we'd inevitably both do the same work. For that reason, I'd want Saegusa to serve as a liaison to update both sides on the status of progress."

Katsuto didn't make any comment on Mayumi's speculation, and instead answered her with his request.

"I have no intention of keeping secrets from Tomokazu-dono regarding my progress. I doubt there is any concern on that from his end. Even so, there will definitely be classified intelligence coming into play for this. Such intel can be hard to share with outsiders considering the sources it usually comes from, and also due to the nature in which it was obtained. Information like that has a possibility of being extrapolated."

"I understand. That's why you want me to liaise? So, basically, I will be a messenger to both sides."

"Yes. I don't mind if you exclude parts that may expose a secret of the Saegusa Family. You'll only need to update me on things related to the terrorist attack."

"That's quite the task…"

Despite her bitter smile, a hint of seriousness was mixed in. Katsuto knew that Mayumi may not mind filtering the information based on her judgement, but there was the possibility of being unable to properly convey what needed to be said by removing too much. It wasn't an easy job.

"…I understand. I will cooperate. I'm the most suitable to do this, as you've said."

"That would be helpful."

"Don't mind. It's also part of my house's problem after all"

Actually, Kouichi was the one who requested Mayumi's role to Katsuto. Although he didn't include a reason, Katsuto could guess that he wanted to increase the face-to-face time between Mayumi and Tatsuya.

It was true that someone needed to take the role of coordinator, but Katsuto was both annoyed and hurt that Kouichi would include him in his scheme. Despite that, Katsuto was still humbled as Mayumi didn't seem to notice her father's ploy.

"Then, how should we proceed? Should we request for a short absence from the university?"

"I wanted to talk about that now."

Katsuto then stared at Tatsuya with a 'but there's one of us here who doesn't need to' look in his eyes.

"We don't need to do something that drastic until we find strong clues. We just need to stay in close contact with each other. If possible, I would like us to be meeting in person, and we should update each other every day with any progress we have. Is that okay with you?"

This 'meeting in person' was practically a demand from Kouichi with Mayumi as a liaison. It was a very well thought out strategy.

"I don't mind."

‘That's good', Katsuto thought. It seemed like Tatsuya hadn't realized what was happening behind the scenes.

"I see."

He answered Tatsuya without hesitation in his facade before turning to Mayumi.

"How about you, Saegusa?"

"I can't promise every day, but as a general idea I don't mind it either."

"That's enough. Where should we meet?"

"If it's just between Juumonji-kun and myself, the Magic University would be ideal, but…"

Mayumi stole a glance at Tatsuya's facial expressions while her speech tapered off.

"No problem."

Tatsuya had his reply ready. He didn't hold back in front of senpai's either since meeting at the Magic University was quite convenient for him as well.

"However, is there any suitable place for us to meet around the Magic University?"

It was necessary for them to meet up instead of using a communication tool, but they still needed a measure against eavesdropping. Security in a normal residence was quite lacking.

"I'll arrange that. We'll begin our exchanges starting the day after tomorrow."

"Roger that."

"Understood. What time should be convenient for you?"

"…Hmm, the day after tomorrow at 1800 hours, come to the main gate of the Magic University."

Katsuto thought for a while before answering Tatsuya's question for the time and place they'd meet up.

'1800 hours, I can make it with a little rest if I skip Student Council activities', he thought.

"Understood."

Tatsuya quickly calculated the time in his head, and agreed to the proposal.

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Somewhere far from Tokyo, Ichijou Gouki visited a local prestigious restaurant, not knowing of the meeting among Katsuto, Tatsuya, and Mayumi. There was no question about the taste of the food nor the service provided at this restaurant, but it was famous for being the place of ‘private conversation' among politicians.

Gouki himself already had around 4-5 meetings with politicians here in the past. Even though he hated doing such things, he couldn't avoid his duty as a one of the Ten Master Clans.

However, his companion today was not a politician.

The lady who sat in front of Gouki was Maeda Chizuru, Third High's principal.

"Maeda-sensei, sorry to call you at such a busy…"

"Ah, let's cut the unnecessary politeness. We're friends, right?"

…If someone heard this way of speaking, they wouldn't think of this lady as a teacher, let alone a principal, but she was unmistakably the principal of the Magic University Affiliated Third High School, which Masaki currently attended.

"…Chizuru-senpai, please act more becoming of your position. Your Magic High School is one of this country's assets."

"How silly, Gouki. You should know that how I act normally is pretentious."

Principal Maeda replied to Gouki's rebuttal with sarcasm.

"Moreover, Magic High Schools are just that, schools. It may belong to the country, but it still isn't a military institution."

She continued her sentence with a savage smile.

Gouki didn't have any intention to relate Magic High Schools to the military, but he didn't refute her comment. He understood what she was getting at with her military background.

Maeda-kouchou was in the military until her late 20's, and her last rank was Lieutenant. She caused a problem for her superior (reportedly, she had filed a sexual harassment case), hence, she needed to retire early. She was then appointed as Third High's Principal due to her unique character, and, in turn, became a 40-year-old educator.

She was Gouki's senior by one year when they studied at Third High. She was a real heroine back then, shining at the top of the batch and unyielding to all including Gouki. To him, Maeda was a figure he would forever be respectful to.

"Well, Gouki. Let's hear it. It's quite rare for you to invite me to a place like this. Is it an important matter?"

"This is a private matter."

Gouki had expected this straightforwardness —— he answered her in a rather deviant tone.

"Hou… don't tell me, you're concerned about your son's GPA or something like that?"

"It may be something similar"

Maeda was prompted to show a sharper gaze to him.

"You know about the terrorist attack in Hakone yesterday, right?"

"I know. It was a disaster."

"So, how about the statement issued by the Magic Association after the incident?"

"Of course I know. However, I doubt that has made any impact. It's a given to blame the terrorist, but it might not reduce the negativity from the non-magicians towards us."

Maeda continued,

"They also didn't say that the ones who bear the responsibility for it are just the targeted magicians."

Gouki interjected.

"We also have no intention to stop at condemning words only."

"Ah, I remember hearing about cooperating as much as possible to arrest the criminal. So that wasn't just sweet talk?"

"Masaki from the Ichijou Family will be involved in the investigation."

Gouki nodded in silence after saying his piece.

Maeda didn't reply with ‘that's reckless'.

"Then?"

Instead, she gave a why-did-you-tell-me-that kind of face to Gouki.

"The one leading the investigation will be Juumonji-dono, and they will start with the crime scene at Hakone. It might take a few weeks, possibly more than a month. That's why Masaki will be staying in Tokyo at our second house, and he will be on a long leave from school."

"You're saying that you want me to treat those days as a holiday instead of having him on leave of absence?"

"Yes. The Ten Master Clan's matters are, after all, not a public service. It's ultimately a private matter, so I realize that this is pushing my luck a little bit. Even so, I wish for my son to be able to carry out his duties with peace of mind."

Gouki lowered his head,

"Certainly, you're somewhat pushing your luck."

Maeda coldly answered.

"Even if you are one of the Ten Master Clan heads, such a convenience isn't possible. My profession alone prevents me from giving special treatment to anyone."

"…I understand"

Gouki didn't say anything further. Maeda wasn't someone who stuck to the rules, and if Gouki were to describe her, it'd be 'an affectionate woman'. However, once she had decided on something, nothing would sway her decision.

"I've asked a foolish thing. Please forget about it."

"No, I can understand your position. I also know it's part of your clan's responsibility to stake out in Tokyo. Regardless, I can't give your son any special treatment. You can try asking for a favor from Momoyama-sensei though."

"Huh? Momoyama-sensei? Are you talking about the principal of the First High?"

Gouki didn't understand why Momoyama's name came up here, and he stared at Maeda with a puzzled expression.

"That's right."

"For what matter specifically?"

"To have your son at his school for a short term."

Maeda didn't mean to hide the details behind her statement, but Gouki had rushed her before she could get any further.

"Wa-wait."

Since it would take too long to explain her plan to Gouki, Maeda gave a signal with her mouth and hand to stop Gouki from talking.

"It wouldn't be a permanent transfer, but I can arrange it so your son can study in First High's theory classes. Magic High Schools have similar curriculums delivered through the terminals. Since both of these schools are affiliated with the Magic University, information exchange between the two is possible. Though physical and practical classes would be impossible, an empty month for Ichijou-kun shouldn't pose a problem."

"In other words, during this mission, he will attend First High as a part-time student?"

"He won't be on a full time stake out like a detective, right?"

Gouki nodded, and Maeda continued to talk.

"In fact, he could technically take his lessons anywhere. The only problem with that is the data can only be accessed through devices that have been approved by the Magic University, since the data is from their end. Even though his surroundings and environment will change, I think he can safely take the liberal arts and theory courses at First High."

At last, an enlightened expression appeared on Gouki's face.

"I wonder if you can prepare the move during this weekend? Then, he should be able to get into First High next Monday. So that will be one month until March 9th, right? Of course, if the case is resolved early, he can get back to Third High anytime."

"Thank you very much, Maeda-senpai. I'm counting on you."

From a parent's point of view, this solution was much more favorable than the original holiday plan. Gouki bowed to Maeda without any hint of objection.

After that, Gouki was detained by Maeda and drank until the sun rose.

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Heigu's statement had set the public opinion towards Magicians aflame. Even some media outlets one-sidedly blamed the Magicians. Perhaps it was due to the heat of the moment, but the accused side didn't seem to be very optimistic that ‘the media is easily cooled down and heated up'.

The First High students were clearly losing their composure. Although they knew that they couldn't do anything, they kept checking the news shown on the TVs in every corner during lunch time. Irritated whispers

could be heard from the students in response to the biased opinion from the mass media.

There were roughly three major opinions amongst the students. Most common were the ones who were angry at the media demonizing Magicians, and this group was mostly male. Then there were the girls who had a stronger fear of the possible hostility Magicians might be exposed to, and finally the students with Numbers in their name. They were affiliated with the Hundred Families and were being quite vocal in their complaints.

The Student Council meeting after school was accompanied by the news in the background. Usually there would've been some music playing as a distraction —— but today they didn't seem to find any desire for music —— anxiety seemed to be rampant. As expected, their efficiency took quite the hit.

Tatsuya was taking a leave from Student Council activities starting tomorrow onwards, but today's work wasn't something he needed to push onto others. He tried to break the silence despite his workload, otherwise they wouldn't be able to finish their tasks even if they stayed there all day.

As such, Tatsuya stopped his hand when he heard a remark that made his ears itch. The one who murmured affirmatives to the news anchor was a senior who was due to graduate next month. Kanon had stuck around the Student Council not to discuss the upcoming graduation party, but rather to hang around the Student Council Treasurer.

"Chiyoda-senpai, do you think that we are in the wrong?"

When Kanon raised her face to meet Tatsuya's gaze, Miyuki and Izumi joined in to protest Kanon's statement. Their objections caused her expression to change, but she suppressed her discomfort for the sake of politeness.

For Izumi, Tatsuya was not only a senior from the same school, but also a colleague on the Student Council. She wasn't in a position to rebuke

him for his comment, and she would've stayed silent even if Miyuki had spoken up. What Kanon had said was enough to make Izumi angry.

Kanon replied with,

"Ahh… for us to receive the backlash for failures caused by the Ten Master Clans."

The Student Council meeting had ended, but their chat continued with the news playing in the background. Kanon's words were remarkably harsh towards magicians, though the discontent wasn't from just her. The mainstream Hundred Families also cast out their dissatisfaction regarding how the Ten Master Clans had ruined their reputation as Magicians.

"Of course the terrorists are to blame for this, but the Ten Master Clans is also at fault for not handling the situation well."

Kanon wasn't the only one who was ranting with this opinion, her classmates seemed to have similar views. The fact that she wasn't the only one who thought this made her all the more vocal. Even so, after giving her opinion this time, she felt a little guilt.

"What is it that we did wrong?"

Izumi changed her attitude, similar to the one she had used in Hakone when talking to the detective. Courteous, yet cold.

Kanon answered back with energy. She understood Izumi's spiteful behavior was fully directed at her.

"Being accused of not helping the general public when you were present in the same place, you should've known this is how it would turn out!"

However, Kanon didn't let herself get too heated up. She managed to contain herself and only put a strong emphasis on her sentence.

Even so, her strong personality shone through. Her emphasis turned her comment into quite an emotional statement.

Though at the end of the day, if one considered the fact she was the senior here, quarreling with an underclassman would result in nothing but a hassle.

"The general public, huh? I wonder what you mean by that."

"What do you mean…?"

Faced against Izumi's philosophical question, Kanon lost her words.

"Are you referring to a civilian? Perhaps, a civil servant? In that sense, the Heads of the Ten Master Clans who are neither soldier nor civil servant can also be labelled as the 'general public'…?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Nothing really, but I wonder why only some of the 'general public' should give priority to, and rescue, the rest of the 'general public' before themselves?"

Izumi covered her mouth with her left hand.

Kanon thought that Izumi was mocking her.

"Hey you!"

Kanon rose from her seat and slammed her hand down on top of the table with a loud bang.

"Kanon, calm down!"

Isori stood up a beat later to hold her back by grabbing her shoulder.

"Izumi-chan, sorry, but do you mind helping me buy something warm for everyone to drink? I'll pay for it."

As silence descended between Kanon and Izumi, Miyuki requested Izumi to run an errand while handing over the Student Council's cash card.

The Student Council room came equipped with a hot water supply, as well as the fixings for tea and coffee. Usually, there was no need to venture outside to buy drinks.

In other words, this was a call for Izumi to cool her head outside.

"I understand…"

Izumi stood up with a regretful look on her face. Being scolded by her favorite, Miyuki, had instantly chilled her temper.

"I will come to help"

Minami rose to offer Izumi her assistance.

"Yes, please."

"Understood. …Saegusa-san, let's go."

Minami bowed toward Miyuki, and took Izumi's hand in concession.

Izumi and Minami's presence faded away on the other side of the door.

After making sure of that, Isori, who sat in front of Kanon, began to speak.

"…That just now was your fault, Kanon. Even if the Ten Master Clans were able to save the victims, they had no responsibility to do so. Ultimately, it was wrong to force your opinion of goodwill onto others."

"But…"

Kanon gave an unsatisfied reply, but Isori interrupt her with a stare.

"Well, if you have people fallen right in front of your eyes, it's instinctive to want to try and help. However, if you were also in danger, it's reasonable to assume you'd want to flee to a safe space before rescuing someone else. Even the Ten Master Clans aren't invincible."

"Well… that might be true."

"Even firefighters would not rush to jump into the fire when death is the price. What they do is a brave and noble act, rescuing others while putting the victims before themselves. But even so, nobody is ever in a position to say 'It's your duty to guarantee our safety' even if you're paying them. It's a cowardly and foolish thing to do, forcing someone to

bear such a huge risk, especially when the captain would be held responsible for the lives of his personnel."

Kanon faced down and averted her eyes in anger from Isori.

"Let alone pressuring someone to do so when they have no obligation to risk themselves, that's just not right. I don't like it when you behave this way, Kanon. Even you would be angry if someone accused you of such a thing, right?"

"…Yeah."

Faced with Isori's gentle reply, Kanon nodded without lifting her face.

"It's good that you understand. Then, when Saegusa-san comes back, you must apologize."

After Isori said so, Kanon once again nodded.

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Kanon promptly apologized to Izumi after she returned to the Student Council Room, and correspondingly, Izumi apologized for her bad attitude towards Kanon. They had successfully made up with each other, but this result could only have been achieved thanks to Isori's rationality which dissolved their anger.

In real life, there were no private exchanges between Magicians and non-Magicians. No entity existed to mediate between the two groups, either. Hence, the resentment, which grew due to the large number of non-Magician victims, would continue to escalate.

It wasn't like there weren't any Magicians trying to justify themselves, but their voices were simply too small. No matter how reasonable and logical they may be, their words simply didn't have the power to reach the ears of others.

The Magicians of this country don't seem to have much choice besides just grinning and bearing these opinions. Such a view was hard to swallow in the eyes of the youth.

The eldest son of the Shippou Family, Shippou Takuma, of the newly appointed clan in the Ten Master Clans, was one among the youth who that idea didn't sit well with.

He was only 16 years old and lacked the means to channel his discontent towards society outwards. Takuma was in the peak of his adolescence, which meant instability covered up by sports and music. In the midst of his turbid emotions, bursts of misguided anger turned into violent incidents.

However, Takuma had clues on the person who ‘started the commotion'. For him, she was the very image of an ‘unfortunate incident' that happened in the past, yet he had no one else to turn to for now.

Until last spring, they were still on equal ground. The fact that they were lending their powers to each other unilaterally didn't damage Takuma's pride.

But at this moment there was so much more at stake than his own puny pride. Takuma convinced himself that what he was about to do was for the sake of Ten Master Clans and the Magicians in Japan.

He thought that it was an act worthy of the Ten Master Clans, so even if he needed to grovel in front of that woman, he would do it. After he decided that, Takuma proceeded to Sawamura Maki's apartment.

Takuma had prepared for the worst, but Maki smoothly invited Takuma inside.

"Good evening. Long time no see, Takuma."

"Yeah. Maki, long time no see."

It was still 9 in the evening, yet Maki was dressed cozily. She was wearing a nightgown that sported a sheer fringed hem that reached down to her calf.

"Sorry. Were you about to rest? If so, I can come back another time?"

Takuma didn't bow in the slightest and was about to turn back,

"Wait, Takuma. I don't mind, so come in."

Maki sat down on the sofa.

Takuma, who was standing still, got offered a seat in front of Maki across the table from her.

The seating arrangement was quite distant compared to the days he visited last spring.

"Takuma, do you want anything to drink?"

"No, don't bother."

For him to show up without any prior arrangements was trouble enough, Takuma didn't want to impose any further.

Maki went wide-eyed and was surprised by his reply.

"…Then, how about some coffee?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Maki pressed a button on the inner part of the sofa's armrest and said "Please serve some coffee". Takuma didn't see any obvious microphone from where he was seated, but it was clearly somewhere.

"Takuma, you knew that today was a day off for me?"

"No, I did not. I was planning to leave a message on the interphone and come back sometime later if you were not around."

"What the heck?"

Maki voiced her amusement out loud. Her facial expression didn't change much, thus Takuma wasn't sure if it was her acting skills or real feelings in play.

"If that's the case, wouldn't calling in advance have saved you the time?"

With Maki's remark, Takuma showed a smile while lamenting his reason for all of this.

"Well… I didn't want to call you for this. To be honest, I hesitated a lot while deciding if I should come here."

Maki didn't inquire into his reluctance to call. Takuma and Maki had parted amicably already, and she was the one who requested it. She could imagine how hard it would've been for the proud boy in front of her to call someone who had dumped him.

"Yet, you didn't think that it would turn into a fool's errand?"

Instead, she asked this.

"Since I'm about to ask for help, I think it's expected to make some effort to meet you."

Maki stared intently to Takuma's face.

Right at that moment, the door of the living room opened.

A women slightly older than Maki emerged, and she politely placed a saucer and coffee cup in front of Takuma.

"Thanks."

The women bowed respectfully to Maki before retreating back to the living room's door.

"…That woman just now was not a 3H, right?"

"No, she isn't."

Maki smiled faintly hearing Takuma's murmur.

"She's my new housekeeper. You know that I hate the 3H, right?"

"I remembered. That's why I asked."

It came up in one of their little chats incidentally, and Takumi hadn't forgotten that Maki felt like she was 'under constant surveillance' with a 3H around.

Takuma wouldn't normally be one to commit such a small detail to memory, but he was still able to remember his partner's likes and dislikes as long as it didn't inconvenience him.

Maki was staring at Takuma, and he averted his eyes awkwardly.

Due to that, he missed Maki's expression when she uttered the next sentence.

"Takuma… you really changed."

Yet, Maki's voice was enough to make Takuma blush in embarrassment.

"Well, somewhat."

Takuma kept reminding himself that this woman was an actress… that she could manipulate other with her voice and expression. He kept his eyes off of her and said,

"It's not a big deal."

Even though he was looking away from Maki, her voice still mysteriously managed to entangle his thoughts.

"Boys around your age sure grow up fast… Not yet a man, but it's somewhat pleasant…"

Maki didn't move an inch from her seat in front of Takuma, but he could still smell the sweet scent of her skin.

"What should I do… I was told to stay away from you, but if it's only this once…"

Even though they were separated by a short distance, he still could hear her murmuring something.

"Maki, I want to ask for a favor!"

To dispel Maki's doubt he lowered his head as he said this.

"A favor…?"

Maki's startled expression went unseen by Takuma as he was facing the floor. All of her playfulness was dispelled by her shock.

Maki and Takuma had a unilateral relationship in the past, which had her fulfilling Takuma's requests. Hence, his bowing gesture caught Maki off guard.

Instead of just asking for her charity, Takuma was willing to pay her back. Maki understood his intention to do so from his actions.

Therefore, Takuma didn't do anything more than lowering his head. Even though he depended on Maki, he still had the resolve not to look lame and weak in front of her.

Even so, the sight of Takuma bowing to the extent of his body being parallel with the floor was too bizarre for Maki. She was almost at a loss trying to figure out how to react to Takuma's changes.

"Takuma, first off, raise your head."

Maki hadn't forgotten Tatsuya's warning. Even if Takuma had been the one who initiated today's meeting, she still wanted to get out of this situation. She just had embellished things with her acting. Maki wanted to avoid any scandals, and she wasn't certain if what Tatsuya had told her earlier was a joke or not.

But even with that possible threat hanging above her, she wrestled with her feelings while looking at how much Takuma had changed.

"What do you need me to do?"

Takuma wasn't the calculating type, and Maki felt that he had truly changed a lot in the past 6 months. Somewhere within her, a feeling of affection sprouted, much like one would have for a younger brother. She became emotionally attached, to a degree, to this young boy who struggled to become a full-fledged man.

Takuma was taken aback by the positive response given by Maki, even more so when he realized she was warmly smiling at him. He quickly got his wits about him and answered in a rushed voice.

"You should know well of the terror incident that happened recently."

"The one in Hakone? By the look of things, it was quite bad."

"Yeah. Despite the fact that Magicians were victims in this as well, we're the ones taking the brunt of the public's outrage."

"But there are reasons for that, right? Due to that incident, innocent people became collateral damage. It's not exactly a baseless complaint."

Maki was not an anti-magician. On the contrary, she wanted to get close to Magicians. The statement she made just now was just the general opinion reflected by the public.

Takuma was not irked by her comment, so either he was being understanding or simply putting up with her.

"Maybe the reason is obvious to you, like you said. But we, Magicians, aren't going to just settle with being labelled as the bad guys in this. If a proper line isn't drawn, Magicians will start to lose their basic human

rights, and people will start witch hunts in the name of 'justice'. Humanity is twisted like that."

Maki didn't try to tell him that was a paranoid notion. Rather, she thought it was just a matter of time.

"I understand. Takuma, you want to borrow my father's power rather than mine, right?"

Maki's father was a president of a corporation with media companies under his wings, including a TV station.

"——Yes!"

After his intentions were laid bare, Takuma faltered for a second.

"I understand this situation will put you at a disadvantage. There's no merit for your father to side with us Magicians on this. Even you would be stigmatized for it. But still, please help me!"

Takuma lowered his head once again. If he was kneeling down, his head would probably have touched the tatami mat.

"I couldn't think of anyone else to depend on other than Maki…!"

Neither could see the other's face, and it worked to Maki's advantage.

Maki recalled her blunder of developing a crush on someone nearly 10 years her junior.

However, she was an actress. There was no way she would let something like this slip out.

"Takuma, you'll return the favor to me."

"Maki…!"

Takuma raised his face with a joyous expression.

"I will definitely ask for a return."

"Yeah, if it's within my power, I'll do anything!"

Takuma would come to regret these words 3 years in the future, and it was recompense he would've never expected. ——In the year 2100, while Takuma was still in college, he would debut on the silver screen as Maki's co-star. He would be the first Magician in the last year of the 21st century to do such a thing.

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Late that same night, the bodies of the perps behind the terrorist attack, currently located in the police morgue, were visited by two people.

One wore a felt hat that covered his eyes, and had a trench coat over his body. On the less suspicious side, he was a middle-aged man who looked like a detective. The other person wore a cap with large sunglasses, topped off with a muffler that covered the lower features of their face. This figure was too tall to be a woman, yet too short to be a man, and was covered in a large woolen coat which caused their body to look ambiguous. Based on just their outward appearance, even if was a young woman in her 20's, nobody would be able to tell.

The one who let them into this place was the coroner. As he let them in, he moved out of the room to leave them to their business. It wasn't from being threatened, but the coroner had been bribed by the man wearing the felt hat —— Kuroba Mitsugu.

Mitsugu turned over the body bag at the side of the bed, looking at the head of the corpse that was about to be swapped. The ones brought in here were all assailants judged to be the terrorists. Suicide bombing as a modus operandi normally wouldn't leave an intact corpse, but there were still some bodies that were relatively undamaged. The corpses on the bed were among those.

For their purposes, leaving the head out wasn't a problem. A freshly severed head would work, but so would something as extreme as a brain that had been blown to pieces. As long as there was something of the

head area present that was more or less intact, it would cause no problems and could be used as a clue.

"Yoshimi."

Mitsugu called to the woman accompanying him. It could've been her given name, surname, or nickname. "Yoshimi", with her cap, sunglasses and muffler, nodded, and touched the laid out corpse with a hand wrapped by a leather glove.

A pale Psion-like light was produced where her hand touched the corpse's forehead. It was similar to the light that was produced when a CAD was activated. In essence, it was about the same. A distortion-less homogenous Psion wave without intention was injected, then the rebound of the Psion was read. Treating the corpse as a CAD, in other words, was a method to process the Psion information body that the corpse stored.

The woman, Yoshimi, was currently reading the corpse's residual thoughts. She was a psychometrist who was skilled in reading traces of psionic information in bodies.

Psions are particles that form thoughts and intentions, while Pushions are particles that result from thoughts and intentions, such was the consensus of current studies in Magic.

In the end, it was still just theory.

The nature of Pushions are still largely unclear.

But the fact that a Psion information body changes according to intention and thoughts was something that has been observed.

Magic sequences, too, are Psion information bodies. Which is why even if the human body was subjected to external magical interference, a person's active and passive mental faculties will cause the Magic Sequence to deform and disappear.

But the dead cannot feel anything. The dead cannot think of anything. Hence, the Psion information body left and the magic sequences stored in a corpse last for much longer compared to that of a living body.

The Kuroba family, the information gatherers of the Yotsuba clan, had a trump card for secret intelligence activities that allowed them to read the Psion information body recorded in a corpse: "Memory of the Dead".

"Yoshimi."

"It's still okay."

Yoshimi coughed from the inside of the muffler, then reached out her hand towards the corpse once again.

"Don't go in too deep. Lest you might not return."

Treating Mitsugu's warning as unnecessary concern, Yoshimi successively retrieved information from the corpses.

Then, after backing off from the sixth corpse, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Found it."

"I see. Then, let's leave."

Mitsugu pulled the gloves from Yoshimi's hand. Yoshimi then took out a new pair of gloves from her coat pocket.

They then left the morgue. Before anyone could notice, Yoshimi's gloves disappeared from Mitsugu's hand.

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Needless to say, the Ten Master Clans weren't the only people looking for the terrorists.

A large-scale terrorist attack taking place right in front of the capital city was an insult to the pride of the police, and was sufficient to anger the top management.

The responsibility for the investigation of the incident fell not on the Kanagawa Local District Police (referred to as the "Japanese FBI") but the Police Department's wide area search team. Usually, the local district police should've been mobilized, but with the nationwide deployment of the Special Investigation detective team that was gathered in South Kantō, it was clear that all manpower was being put into investigation.

Unexpectedly, Officer Toshikazu, who had been put on standby in the home office, had gone ahead to investigate without waiting for the detectives to be mobilized. Much like many others, he, too, felt resentment at the incident this time. Hence, his rare motivation surfaced.

However, the investigation hit a wall right off the bat.

"All the perpetrators are dead? How is that possible?"

Toshikazu was idly grumbling while standing by an unmarked police car.

"It's because they're suicide bombers, which was already mentioned before, right?"

Assistant Inspector Inagaki, acting as the driver, replied as though to pacify Toshikazu. But Inagaki, too, found it strange. The explanation wasn't too persuasive.

"I understand that suicide bombers naturally die. But for those who don't have any traces of wounds from explosions to die, isn't that strange? There are corpses here that don't have many injuries."

"Moreover, the autopsy report states that the time of death is at least 1 day before the day of the incident. Taking into the account that the body might have been in cryopreservation, the time of death could possibly go back up to ten days… Corpses carrying bombs and walking?"

"Is this a B class occult movie!? …If only that was something to laugh at."

Toshikazu said as he leaked a smile filled with despair.

"As I thought, the police department thinks that it's a magic that can control corpses?"

Toshikazu nodded reluctantly towards Inagaki's question. Inagaki, who was driving, noticed the subtle gesture and muttered "is that so?".

"That explanation fits the scenario most logically. …How annoying."

To conclude that Magic was a result of fiction and, therefore, excluded from investigations was a thing of the past. Police investigations could no longer disregard magic as a factor, with Toshikazu being a magician himself. To deny the existence of magic would be to deny his own existence.

Having said that, to current magic users like him, magic that can control corpses, no matter how you looked at it, was a suspicious and shady thing.

"As expected, we have no choice but to consult a specialist huh?"

"Spirit magic specialists? Well, we're definitely amateurs in this field. Having someone well-versed in that area to explain it to us would be a great help, but─"

Toshikazu knit his brows at Inagaki's suggestion. There were Magicians who were privy to some knowledge of magic that could control corpses but it certainly presented an ethical problem. It would be unthinkable to publicly announce having that knowledge.

"The only information that came up when searching the police database for ‘Necromancy' was that of those who were dead."

Though it was something that he himself suggested, Inagaki understood that looking for such personnel was difficult.

"That is so… But, we have no useful leads. Let's just try that plan."

Sighing, Toshikazu muttered slovenly to his subordinate.

"Inagaki-kun. Head to Roter Wald."

"That information shop huh…? I understand."

With an "it can't be helped" face, Inagaki drove the car to Yokohama.

In the middle of the Yokohama Yamate Hill, there was a tea cafe with a mountain hut design called "Roter Wald." Upon entering the calm atmosphere of the interior of the shop, Toshikazu instinctively moved his eyes to look for someone.

He was very aware of who he was looking for. It was in the fall of 2095, just before the "Yokohama accident" which shook Japan, no, the whole word. He recalled meeting that woman, Fujibayashi Kyouko, when he was investigating for clues regarding illegal immigrants.

Toshikazu hadn't met with her except for that one time at Sakuragichou Station. It wasn't a date, but rather spurned by their interests and duties being aligned. ——Though, Toshikazu's feelings did not stop there.

After it had all been resolved, Toshikazu was busy chasing after the illegal immigrants who were still in hiding, hence he didn't have the luxury of contacting Fujibayashi again. Just as he wrapped up his collecting, the "Vampire Incident" had begun, which ended up keeping him occupied. Last Spring, he had also taken a short leave from Kantō. Due to all of this, he never had a chance to even think about her.

Toshikazu had started thinking about Fujibayashi again because this was the first place he had met her. Was it romance? Sentiment? Possibly… regret? Engaging in self-derision, which was totally unlike him, Toshikazu sat down at the counter.

Catching Inagaki seated beside him from his periphery, Toshikazu ordered "two Blends".

The owner didn't like impatience in his shop.

While waiting for his coffee, Toshikazu absent-mindedly looked around the shop.

As usual, there were many customers, but it was not full.

Not wanting his gaze to seem too unpleasant, Toshikazu soon stopped looking around.

Then, hearing the ring of the cowbell on the door, he turned around to look at the person. It wasn't out of vigilance, but rather because he was bored that he did it reflexively.

He almost immediately stood up. It was an unconscious reaction to him seeing who had walked in.

"Oh, Inspector."

Laying eyes on the beautiful woman the same age as him, they opened a little wider than normal.

"Fujibayashi-san…"

The person who opened the door was the woman he was just thinking about, Fujibayashi Kyouko.

"It's been awhile, Inspector Chiba. May I sit here?"

She purposely avoided wearing conspicuous makeup, but upon closer inspection, she had features that were rather eye-catching. With an appearance similar to the first time they had met, Fujibayashi asked him a question.

"Ah, sure, go ahead."

Not noticing Inagaki knitting his brows —— not that he was pretending not to notice, but he really didn't notice —— Toshikazu nodded while replying.

Smiling, Fujibayashi sat down next to Toshikazu.

Toshikazu was aware of his unreasonable nervousness. ——Although whether or not it was truly "unreasonable" was something that he was not aware of.

"Owner, a blend please."

Putting her coat on the adjacent seat, Fujibayashi ordered the same thing as Toshikazu.

"Inspector, you don't seem to have changed."

"Yes, my only redeeming factor is that I'm quite sturdy."

Even now, Toshikazu's voice seemed uneasy.

"Maa, how humble."

Fujibayashi replied with a polite smile.

The side of Toshikazu's cheeks stiffened.

"By the way, is Fujibayashi-san on holiday today?"

The nature of her job wasn't exactly easy going. Despite knowing that, Toshikazu couldn't just directly ask her "Did you come here on duty?" without knowing if anyone was listening in.

"Yes. Since the coffee that the owner makes here is quite delicious."

While saying so, Fujibayashi bowed to the owner who had just turned to face her.

If Toshikazu had said the same thing, the owner would probably not have shown any response. It seemed that despite the fact that Fujibayashi's residence was quite far from here, she was a common customer in this cafe.

"Is Inspector on break too?"

"Uhh, well… haha… speaking of which, is Fujibayashi-san familiar with Ancient Magic?"

He really wanted to get up and run away, but he hadn't forgotten about the investigation. It wasn't as a man, but rather as a detective, that he remembered this woman's lineage.

"Yes, more or less."

"If you have the time to spare, could you please tell me a little about it?"

Fujibayashi's and Toshikazu's eyes met.

"Sorry for the wait"

At that instant, the owner's voice cut in. A coffee cup was placed in front of both Toshikazu and Inagaki.

"I don't mind. But before that, did you have something you wanted to ask the owner?"

As Fujibayashi pointed that out, Toshikazu recalled his motive for dropping by this cafe. Unfortunately, it seemed that he couldn't just neglect his work.

Toshikazu wrote a request for an introduction to a specialist regarding magic for controlling corpses under the memo, then the owner returned it after writing his answer. Cramming the information into his head, Toshikazu then returned the paper to the owner. Seeing the owner's light smile, it seemed that was the right choice.

As for Fujibayashi, she came today truly just to drink the coffee, and have some light chatter with the owner.

He rose together with her.

"Owner, the bill. I'll pay for hers as well. Keep the change."

Before Fujibayashi could interrupt, Toshikazu passed a high limit money card to the owner. Inagaki, who stood up after Toshikazu, raised his brows in shock at the amount the card held. Though Toshikazu had included the cost of the information he received, he paid much more than the market price.

"It's a little too much."

The owner lightly knit his brows.

"Then please count it when we come next time."

Toshikazu replied.

"I await your continued patronage."

The owner refrained from further dispute and slightly lowered his head.

Toshikazu, as he exited Roter Wald, accepted Fujibayshi's invitation for a ride. Inagaki's unmarked patrol car followed after them.

"Then, Inspector, the thing you wanted to ask about is related to the terrorist incident in Hakone, correct?"

Soon after heading out, Fujibayashi suddenly brought up the issue.

"…Yes."

Toshikazu decided to throw caution to the wind. He understood it was a good idea to just cut to the chase.

"There's something strange about this incident."

"Strange?"

Fujibayashi's hand was on the drive lever, but in truth the car was driving itself. This meant that there was no danger in turning to talk to someone sitting in the shotgun seat. Toshikazu had unexpectedly decent police training, so he was aware of this, but he still considered it a somewhat dangerous move.

It seemed his thoughts were more obvious than he realized, as Fujibayashi quickly turned her head back to face the road.

"Yeah, none of the perpetrators are alive."

"…Could they have escaped?"

Fujibayashi offered a logical response.

"No."

Toshikazu flatly denied.

"The attack was concentrated in the hotel. The street cameras were still functional even after the incident."

"The cameras didn't show any of the terrorists running away from the scene?"

"Yeah. The terrorists that infiltrated the hotel were all captured by the cameras, and the identity of each one was confirmed. Some of the corpses have yet to be found, but we can say for sure that no terrorists escaped alive."

"Although the perpetrators were caught on the camera, they weren't stopped?"

Toshikazu was embarrassed to answer, but he didn't hide it and gave an explanation.

"We found no traces of explosives, and their appearances were rather normal, so there was no reason to stop them from entering a hotel that was open for business."

"…You're saying that if the Ten Master Clans had booked the whole hotel beforehand, the situation could've been avoided?"

"Well, yes. At the very least we could have greatly reduced the number of casualties."

Until the Master Clans Conference, Fujibayashi was a relative of the Kudou Family, which was one of the Ten Master Clans. What Toshikazu said inevitably brought about an awkward atmosphere.

Shaking that off, Toshikazu moved on to the main topic.

"In truth, there is one other odd thing about all of this… my conjecture is that the terrorists were already dead by the time they had infiltrated the building."

"I see… so you came to ask about "Doll Makers"?"

"Doll Makers?"

Toshikazu had tried to find researchers familiar with Necromancy Magic. He had no intention of asking about people who could control human bodies.

"The ones you're actually looking for aren't researchers, but Ancient Magicians called "Doll Makers". They're rumored to use forbidden magic that can control corpses, and they're a group that the Magic community are cautious of."

"That's…"

"They would definitely be your best bet, they're privy to knowledge in that field. They're more or less 'researchers'."

Fujibayashi turned to face Toshikazu again.

"But please be careful, Inspector. "Doll Maker" Oumi Kazukiyo's ties with Dahan magicians are by no means shallow."

At Fujibayashi's warning, Toshikazu's face stiffened as he nodded.

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Friday, February 8th, 5:57 P.M. As instructed by Katsuto, Tatsuya had come to the front gate of the Magic University.

Tatsuya had returned home and then used public transportation to get there; he had gone out wearing an easy-to-move-in half coat over his tailored jacket. This made Tatsuya look even older than he did wearing his Magic Sigh school uniform. It was well-established in society that Magic University students looked more mature than their regular university counterparts. However, when they were dressed up like this, they looked even more mature than usual.

"Tatsuya-kun."

It was just 5 minutes past the agreed meeting time when Tatsuya was called out to by Mayumi as she came out of the school gate. She was

casually dressed, wearing a duffle coat with a knee-length skirt and long boots over a pair of thick tights. Coupled together with how she was carrying her light tote bag with her shoulder, she carried the aura of a university student… If he mentioned this to her though, she would definitely get angry. Standing side by side in their respective outfits, he definitely would be seen as the upperclassman.

"Sorry, have you been waiting long?"

"It was within the margin of error. Don't worry about it."

Mayumi had been out of breath when she asked her question, and Tatsuya responded to her rather frankly.

However, Mayumi seemed quite miffed by his answer.

"Jeez… You're supposed to say ‘It's fine, I just got here too.'"

It seemed like Mayumi had expected to have some kind of casual dialogue with Tatsuya. Unfortunately, he didn't grasp the meaning behind her answer, but Tatsuya didn't hesitate to try and fulfill her request.

"I just got here, too."

However, this still didn't seem to satisfy Mayumi, and she gazed at Tatsuya with unamused eyes.

"By the way, wasn't Juumonji-senpai supposed to be with you?"

Without faltering or panicking, Tatsuya continued the conversation as though nothing was wrong.

Mayumi breathed out a seemingly deliberate sigh.

"…Juumonji-kun has gone ahead to a place where we can talk. I know where it is so just follow me."

Whether she was satisfied or had simply given up was unknown, but Mayumi prompted Tatsuya and then began walking.

Tatsuya immediately walked to her right side and kept pace.

Mayumi had already swapped the tote bag hanging from her right shoulder over to her left shoulder.

She had raised her right hand towards him several times, as if trying to invite Tatsuya, but in the end they simply continued walking without entwining their arms or holding hands.

Mayumi took Tatsuya to a spot which was about a 10-minute walk from the Magic University; it was a regular house that looked stylish at first glance. The only conspicuous aspect of the house was a terrace attached to the roof with a single round table and four chairs.

However, when they went inside, the first floor was revealed to be an empty, small-scale restaurant. Had Katsuto simply reserved the restaurant so that there would be no sign out front, or perhaps this restaurant didn't serve guests without an introduction from an existing customer?

"You can't enter this store without an introduction, which keeps out the riffraff. Also, Juumonji-kun has made many reservations here in the past, so we don't need to worry about the eyes and ears of other guests."

As if reading Tatsuya's thoughts, Mayumi provided an answer to his internal question. It seemed that he was correct on both points.

Leaving the building's external appearance aside, the first floor was a restaurant, so perhaps it was just common sense that Tatsuya kept his shoes on. As Mayumi walked with him, the heels of her boots clicked rhythmically on the floor.

"Sorry we kept you waiting, Juumonji-kun."

"It's fine, I just got here, too."

Tatsuya admired Katsuto's response, delivering the exact line that Mayumi had wanted to hear, but didn't voice his praise. How did he know that was the answer she had been looking for? These two had probably met many times prior to this.

"Sit, if you would."

Without speaking a word of what he had just been thinking about, Tatsuya obeyed Katsuto's suggestion and sat in front of him with a nonchalant look on his face.

Mayumi sat diagonally across from Katsuto; that's to say she sat next to Tatsuya. He didn't think it meant anything, which honestly was only natural as they both entered together side-by-side. It only made sense to sit like this. At least, that was Tatsuya's reasoning process.

Tatsuya's memories of being summoned by Mari and their conversation were still fresh in his mind. He would be lying if he said he was totally unaware that Mayumi liked him. However, to answer the question of whether he could see Mayumi like that, it was "No".

Tatsuya had come to terms with Miyuki's feelings, and had become her fiancé. However, that didn't mean he really accepted Miyuki's feelings.

For him, Miyuki was still his little sister.

Even now, he held no real romantic feelings for her.

Even if he had already decided on how to respond to Miyuki's feelings, his heart still wasn't in the same place.

In terms of romance, Miyuki alone was the absolute limit of Tatsuya's capacity. If he troubled himself with Mayumi, it would become an obstacle to his work. For that reason, Tatsuya had already decided to not even think about having that sort of relationship with Mayumi.

On that topic, the way Mayumi had been conducting herself till now had honestly been a big help for Tatsuya.

Based on how Mari had described things, there was no mistaking the fact she had really riled up Mayumi. Even if he didn't think about the reasons behind it, when he was given a harsh talking to by her, he couldn't help but become aware of it. When it came to inspiring others with agitation, it was much more effective if you hadn't known the other for very long. Tatsuya knew that deliberately winding others up wasn't just a technique for sensual affairs, but also for coercion and placation. Still, the psychological mechanisms involved were very similar.

With this in mind, Tatsuya had exercised caution, but fortunately, Mayumi had not shown any clear signs of having been affected in such a way. Tatsuya still had no clue as to what she was thinking about, but she couldn't tell what Tatsuya was thinking of, either. They were in the same boat.

"I know this is sudden, but have you learned anything new?"

In response to Katsuto's seemingly impatient question, Tatsuya and Mayumi looked at each other.

As a result of their eye contact, Mayumi spoke first.

"Unfortunately, we don't have any clues that stand out at the moment. We know that the terrorists came to Japan from America by sea, and based on our estimations, it seems likely that they arrived on land in Yokosuka. However, these are nothing but guesses."

"On our end, we've received some info from the USNA."

Mayumi was surprised at Tatsuya's words and Katsuto displayed a hint of surprise.

"From America? Just who do you have helping you out?"

High-level magicians attempting to leave the country were strictly controlled.

With that in mind, it was rather difficult for magicians to construct an overseas information network without being attached to a government agency. Among the Ten Master Clans, only the Mitsuya Family was an exception, due to their ability to obtain information while conducting transactions with weapons dealers. Mayumi and Katsuto had no recollection of the Yotsuba Family having overseas information sources.

"Well, it's complicated."

"…Sounds like it's something we shouldn't ask about. Sorry."

Realizing Tatsuya had deliberately been ambiguous, Mayumi lowered her head in embarrassment. Even if Tatsuya wasn't her equal as a

member of the Ten Master Clans, attempting to pry into someone else's secrets was not praiseworthy behavior.

Tatsuya responded to Mayumi's apology with a short "No problem" without any further mention.

"According to the data, our terrorist mastermind is a magician named Gu Jie, formerly from Dahan. His English name is "Jiedo Heigu." Externally, he appears to be in his 50s, with black skin and white hair. Unfortunately, this data's authenticity cannot be verified."

Maya had also authorized the sharing of info related to Gu Jie with Katsuto and company. Tatsuya hadn't sought her permission to share this information, rather, she had directed him to do so. This would let the Saegusa Family start investigating him as well.

"There may be no proof, but considering our current state with no leads, it's useful information. Saegusa."

"Yes. We can use this information to pick out suspicious foreigners who have entered the country in the past two weeks."

Mayumi caught Katsuto's gaze and nodded.

"However, it is possible that they secretly entered the country."

"That's most likely the case. Even so, when someone makes movements like this, they always leave traces behind. If we narrow our investigation to the region between Yokosuka and Hakone, I expect we'll be able to find some clues. We can also get the local police to assist us as well."

The Chiba Family wielded the most sway over the police. At one point in time, it was commonly said that the Chiba Family accounted for around half of the people seeking to become magic policemen, especially riot squad members. However, in terms of the investigative branch of the Kantō region, the Saegusa Family reigned supreme.

Though all of that was irrelevant, as this was a massive incident. Even if they weren't ordered by a third party, it was only common sense that the

police would be frantically searching for the culprit. They would be chomping at the bit for even the most trivial of clues.

And for Katsuto, that was something he understood without needing an explanation.

"I see. Then I'll trust you to take steps in that direction, Saegusa. As for you Shiba, please continue gathering clues."

"Alright, that sounds good."

"Understood."

The three of them looked at each other in unison and nodded.

"Any proposals from you two? If you have anything you'd like to ask, as well."

Tatsuya and Mayumi had no particular response to Katsuto's inquiry.

Katsuto nodded.

"What do you two feel like eating? If you've got an appetite, I can have them prepare something for you right away."

He posed this question to the two of them.

"Sorry, I'll be eating dinner at home."

Tatsuya turned him down on his offer first.

"…I'll pass for now as well. Maybe I'll let you treat me tomorrow."

Mayumi said so in an apologetic tone as she snuck a glance at Tatsuya.

"Okay, then. Then, you don't mind meeting again at this time tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

"Understood. If something comes up, then I will let you know."

Tatsuya supposed that "something" meant that Katsuto might be working late into the night on the investigation. Perhaps he knew

something, or perhaps he was holding back some details about his personal life, Tatsuya didn't press Katsuto for the details.

"Umm. I've got another business meeting after this. Shiba, do you mind taking Saegusa home?

Katsuto said so suddenly, although it wasn't likely that he meant for Tatsuya to go as a substitute for himself.

"H-huh!? No really, I'm fine."

Mayumi refused Katsuto's suggestion with a flustered face. If you were looking from the Magic University, this restaurant was on the opposite side of the train station. If they were to walk together now they might be seen by university acquaintances and become the subject of rumors.

"It's already getting dark outside. I'm not doubting Saegusa's ability to protect herself, but we don't know where the terrorists could be hiding. There's a possibility you might be targeted, so I can't permit a woman to walk home alone.

However, with the possibility that they might become targets for terrorists pointed out, it was hard to muster a counterargument. For this reason, Mayumi felt that her obstinate refusal just because of Tatsuya was all the more embarrassing.

"Saegusa-senpai. I'll take you home."

Katsuto had given Mayumi no way out, and Tatsuya's words cemented the result.

"…Alright then, if you would. I'll see you tomorrow Juumonji-kun."

"Yeah. Be careful going home."

Katsuto sent them off with those words, and Mayumi and Tatsuya departed from the restaurant together.

It was about 10 minutes from the restaurant to the Magic University. Then, another 10 minutes from the University to the Cabinet Station.

The sky was completely dark, with no moonlight or starlight to speak of. But, thanks to the streetlights, they didn't have to worry about not being able to see where they were walking. Still, visibility was severely limited when compared to this afternoon, so Mayumi's pace naturally became slower.

This kind of darkness was no obstacle for Tatsuya. He didn't take off and leave Mayumi behind, or start dragging her by the hand in a hurry, nothing like that. He simply matched her pace and walked alongside her.

There was nothing but silence between the two. Tatsuya had nothing to break the ice, and he understood that Mayumi was uncomfortable walking next to him.

"Ah…"

Just like that, they had come to the front of the University, and Mayumi suddenly raised her voice.

"It's snowing…"

Mayumi had stopped, looking up into the sky. As though her voice had been the signal, snowflakes were now fluttering down from the night sky, twinkling faintly in the city lights.

From a holder inside his coat, Tatsuya took out a thinly folded umbrella as well as the umbrella's separated handle. Due to improvements in raw materials, this umbrella was so thin that it could be kept inside a coat without becoming a nuisance; the shaft for the umbrella was so slim that it was difficult to hold by itself, which meant that when you opened it, you had to attach a handle to it. (Many such folding umbrellas featured switches on the handle that opened the umbrella.)

Tatsuya opened his umbrella and looked next to him; Mayumi was still staring up at the sky as the snow fell.

"Saegusa-senpai, you should probably get out your umbrella."

Mayumi turned at the sound of Tatsuya's voice and gave him a mischievous smile.

"…You didn't bring an umbrella?"

Mayumi shifted her eyes back and forth while still smiling.

Tatsuya had to consciously stop himself from sighing. In a modern era in which weather reports had become highly accurate, he didn't think that there were people who ignored the precipitation forecasts.

"Did you not check the weather forecast before you left today, or something…?"

"I was in a hurry this morning…"

Mayumi was wearing a grin as though she were bonking her own head for her carelessness.

Tatsuya held out his own umbrella to her.

"Please use it."

"Ah, err, I'm fine really."

Mayumi had become flustered and couldn't answer naturally.

"It's just snow, not rain, and it's not even coming down that hard, so…"

"Yes. It's not coming down hard, which means that I'll be fine without an umbrella. Please use it, senpai."

"Umm, but…"

"If by some chance I end up letting you catch a cold, I'll be on the receiving end of a punch from Juumonji-senpai."

Mayumi let a chuckle slip at Tatsuya's seriousness as he offered her the umbrella.

"I don't think Juumonji-kun would resort to that sort of violence, but…"

Mayumi said so as she reached out to take the umbrella, but she didn't just take it from Tatsuya, she met his right hand with her left hand. She stayed just like that, with her body so close to Tatsuya that their shoulders could touch.

"Well, shall we go in together?"

An oncoming car passed Tatsuya on his left side. The sidewalk was wide enough so there was no danger. But for just an instant, the car's headlights lit up Mayumi's happy face, and made it stand out.

Her smile was like that of an innocent child.

"…Understood."

Still smiling, Mayumi released her left hand from Tatsuya's right hand.

Tatsuya leaned his umbrella to the right, in Mayumi's direction.

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Tatsuya took Mayumi as far as he could on his personal scooter. He originally intended to drop her off at her house, but when Mayumi had offered "Wanna come to my house? My family won't mind" with no warning or coercion in her voice, Tatsuya was left with no option but to quickly change plans.

As Tatsuya returned home, Miyuki was waiting for him in the entrance as usual. When she helped Tatsuya out of his half-coat, she caught the faintest hint of Mayumi's perfume which caused her to raise her eyebrows—but she said nothing. She didn't even pout or make a joke about it.

Ever since New Year's, she had become timid around Tatsuya.

She hadn't willfully changed her behavior, but there was no way she could simply continue acting as just Tatsuya's little sister.

Even when she was just merely Tatsuya's little sister, she never wanted to be disliked by him.

As his little sister, she had no sense of overhanging crisis. Now that things had changed between them, it came out in full force.

What if Tatsuya disliked her? The mere thought made her chest hurt. What would happen if she got jealous or mad at him and caused him to get angry, or if she pushed him too far? The images that assaulted her mind made her blood run ice-cold.

If she were his little sister, even if she were disliked, she was still family. The bond between brother and sister couldn't be cut.

But an engagement could be called off if one side came to dislike the other.

She'd lose her status as his fiancée, which she had worked hard to achieve. That was a nightmare that Miyuki couldn't bear. It wouldn't simply be "difficult to bear", she knew that she wouldn't be able to deal with it. She thought she'd never be able to get him back again, so she couldn't let him go. If she were abandoned by Tatsuya, Miyuki truly believed that she wouldn't be able to go on living.

"Did anything happen while I was out?"

Tatsuya had been facing away from her while having his coat taken off, and he now faced Miyuki to ask her a question.

"A message from Hayama came. I think we should talk about it over dinner, would that be alright?"

Miyuki responded with a smile that completely concealed her internal unease.

Minami joined them for a dinner for three, and Miyuki explained the contents of the phone call from Hayama to Tatsuya.

"Kamakura?"

"Yes. In the Imperial Mausoleum area of Nishigaoka in Kamakura, there is a hideout that Zhou Gongjin bought under a fake name. It's suspected that Gu Jie is hiding there."

"So they know that much already…"

He was curious about how they had identified this specific location. More importantly, if they knew this much, then why weren't they moving to arrest him?

"Onii-sama, is there something you're unsure about?"

Miyuki questioned him, reading the subtle change in Tatsuya's facial expression.

"Ah, no, just planning out how to handle this."

Tatsuya couldn't just reveal his doubts. If he told Miyuki, it would sound like he was blaming her for not confirming the situation thoroughly. Tatsuya himself didn't feel that way, but Miyuki would no doubt assume he meant it like that.

Tatsuya had realized that Miyuki had become terribly nervous, to the point that her facial expression was changing in response to every word he said. He was wondering that his little sister could possibly be so afraid of. However, there was nothing he could do to assuage her at the moment. He still couldn't whisper the words she wanted to hear into her ear.

"Let's consult Hayama-san about their battle plan for this later."

With that, Tatsuya brought the discussion to a close.

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At about the same time, Gu Jie had been preparing to leave his hideout in Kamakura.

He had been using Hliðskjálf and happened to intercept a transmission regarding the Hakone Incident, and that the mastermind was hiding in Kamakura. The actual address obtained in the intercepted data was incorrect, but it was still in the general area. If he lingered any longer, he would definitely be caught with no hope of escaping. Gu Jie knew that

his time was short, but he had no intent of blowing himself out of desperation.

He was unaware his location was going to be compromised through his use of Hliðskjálf. Gu Jie had been careful to omit his position in outgoing transmissions and queries, so he felt intense unease regarding the capabilities of his enemies. If he didn't know how they operated, it was impossible to prepare countermeasures.

If he limited his search to Kuroba Mitsugu's outgoing transmissions, it was possible he could find some past data mentioning the location. But if his search terms were too specific, it might become obvious that Gu Jie himself was a Hliðskjálf operator.

No. Gu Jie thought it over again. Even if he was detected by another operator through Hliðskjálf, it was irrelevant. He knew he had little time left regardless, and if someone in charge of intelligence control noticed an unknown operator in the system, it would be a little damaging for the Yotsuba.

But he had no time to do that at the moment. His first priority was escaping without being noticed. This hideout had been prepared in advance so that his traces would be erased to the utmost degree, and to increase the tracking difficulty, he also had minimal luggage. Gu Jie stepped out onto the snowy night road, and used his five senses on top of his extrasensory awareness to conduct a full sweep of his surroundings. Nobody else was around.

"I'll be leaving the greeting of our guests to you."

Gu Jie left those orders to his newly-created doll and headed to his next hideout.

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USA West Coast, local time, February 8th, 07:00 A.M. Raymond Clark wolfed down his breakfast, put on his Hliðskjálf terminal, and started investigating the terrorist incident that had occurred in Hakone, Japan.

Although he was "investigating", he already knew the "truth of the incident" from the start—well actually, he knew it from the preparatory stages of the incident. What Raymond really wanted to know about was the "hero" who had led the incident to its resolution.

If there were no incidents, there were no heroes.

For that precise reason, he had given no information about how the incident could have been stopped preemptively.

There was no fun in chasing off the bad guy and ending the incident without a grand finale.

That's why, when the investigation reached a dead end, he had supported the "hero" by providing and controlling information. Dropping hints on how to resolve the incident just before the bad guy got away somehow made him feel like a big shot. This was Raymond's favorite game to play.

Raymond looked over the previous day's events and knit his eyebrows.

The present investigation was not proceeding in a direction that suited his tastes. The perpetrator had obtained info from Hliðskjálf and was using that to evade detection from the "hero's" side. This seemed like foul play to Raymond.

Of course, he understood that Jiedo Heigu had used Hliðskjálf to stop the Yotsuba from determining his exact location. As a result, it was unknown whether he had managed to escape from his hideout successfully or not. However, the fact itself that Heigu had accessed Hliðskjálf to obtain data he shouldn't know about was intolerable for Raymond.

Raymond had thought of Hliðskjálf as a tool for use by the "scenario-writer" and the "director" of the story. It had been a "behind-the-scenes" tool used for constructing the stage, and if someone in the play gained access, it would create an imbalance of information between the actors and cause his play to fall apart. This was a rule violation that he absolutely could not tolerate as a spectator, nor as a "staff" member.

As long as Heigu remained the villain, it wasn't an issue if he used Hliðskjálf. But Heigu had stepped up onto the stage like this, which meant that Raymond could not allow him to continue using Hliðskjálf as a tool to disrupt the play.

True to the name that Raymond used, "Seven Sages" there were seven Hliðskjálf operators. However, among the seven operators, Raymond was the only person who used that name. Raymond, the singular ‘Seven Sages', decided that he'd submit a request to Hliðskjálf's administrator that only he knew about to have Heigu's account deleted.

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Saturday, February 9th, before dawn.

With more than two hours before the sun would rise, Tatsuya set out in the pitch black darkness on his motorcycle, and headed for Kamakura.

Zooming around on his favorite motorcycle, before 5 A.M., he was traversing the hilly western area of Kamakura, then arrived at the villa district where Gu Jie was hiding.

There stood a shadow that was too tall for a woman and too short for a man, wearing big sunglasses despite the sun not having risen yet, a large cap pulled down over their eyes, and a scarf wrapped all the way up to the nose.

As a result of all this outerwear, it was difficult to discern whether it was actually male or female. But for Tatsuya, he didn't care about the gender.

He took his right glove off and stuck it deep in his coat pocket, and with his left hand took out his information terminal, showing her the screen. Mirroring Tatsuya, the woman exposed her right hand to the chilly air and took out her own terminal.

At the same time, both of them used their index fingers to press on the opposite person's information terminal.

The built-in finger scanners activated and the terminals read their fingerprints.

The two nodded at each other simultaneously and put away their terminals, putting their gloves back on.

"Lead the way, if you will."

"This way."

With a nod to Tatsuya, Yoshimi took the lead and began walking. Tatsuya left his bike behind and followed behind her.

Yoshimi stopped in front of one of the villas. There were no human presences in the vicinity, but she knew it was surrounded by a Yotsuba Family task force. This method of concealment was totally different than what a Kuroba Family combatant would use. She couldn't put her finger on it, but it was certainly a member of a different family. She didn't sense the "existence" of Tsukuba Yuuka or Shibata Katsushige, so that meant that it was either a Mashiba Family, Shiiba Family, Mugura Family, or a Shizuka Family member.

Well, that didn't matter right now. She would clear up her doubts from last night right here and now.

The family that had located this hidden villa was the Kuroba Family. However, due to some circumstances, the duty of sieging it had fallen to another Branch Family.

Gu Jie was said to use corpse manipulation magic. This wasn't done by controlling an implanted Spirit Being; it was a technique that directly controlled the body after death.

Mental Interference Magic had no effect on mindless corpses, and because corpses felt no pain, Kuroba Mitsugu's subordinates' specialty, "Poisoned Bees", was useless. Thus, it was only logical that the Kuroba Family would be excluded at the combat stage of the plan.

The single Kuroba Family member included in the operation, Yoshimi, had found what she thought to be a clue when she was chasing someone.

"This, right? The house number looks wrong to me."

"Wrong number."

Under her muffler, Yoshimi grumbled restlessly. Her lack of words had been deliberate; she had been told to leave as few traces behind as possible. She did not know if that was part of her preparation as a spy, or if it was simply a taboo imposed upon those instructed in special magic's. Tatsuya wasn't particularly well-acquainted with her so he didn't pay it any mind.

Tatsuya drew his Trident and directed his Elemental Sight towards the inside of the hideout.

There were three human-shaped beings.

Not corpses. Living humans.

However, they were not just mere humans——

"All hands, heat resistant, anti-magic defenses!"

shouted Tatsuya as he pulled the trigger on his handgun-shaped CAD.

The Magic Sequence targeting Tatsuya and Yoshimi dispersed.

At the same moment, the hideout burst into flames.

Tatsuya activated the cast for "Leap" and flew backward a large distance.

Without a moment's hesitation, he spoke in a strong tone to Yoshimi, who had leaped further back than him.

"Gu Jie isn't here. What's inside are three ‘Generators'."

Their ambush had been performed on three reinforced Magicians called "Generators." This meant that their plan had been somehow leaked.

However, Tatsuya and Yoshimi did not waste time with doubts about the operation or questioning the means by which the information was leaked.

"Leave the corpses intact, please."

This was the only request that Yoshimi made of Tatsuya. If the corpses were hit with Mist Dispersion, she wouldn't be able to get even the slightest clue about the magic involved.

At the same time, that didn't mean they had to be left alive. Which meant a drastic decrease in the difficulty of the battle. It was a happy request for Tatsuya, who made very few exceptions for murderers.

"Stay back. I'll handle this myself."

With a nod, Yoshimi jumped back even further. At the same moment the Branch Families gradually stopped their advance.

Something from within the blazing hideout was emitting magic. It was an "Ignition" Sequence. There had been no expansion of the Activation Sequence.

(Similar to a psychic, was it a generator specialized in a particular ability?)

As Tatsuya guessed at the true identity of the enemy, his allies stealthily moved towards the bushes and houses to analyze the "Ignition" Magic Sequence.

No matter how unpopular this time of the morning was, just this incident was enough to bring out the firefighters. Although there were plenty of unoccupied villas, there could be no mistake about the neighbors popping their heads out to look at the unfolding scene.

It took almost no time at all.

Tatsuya aimed his silver CAD Trident at the blazing house and activated Mist Dispersion.

He couldn't safely put the fire out using his "Decomposition."

Even if he decomposed the house, the flammable materials would all be exposed at once and result in an explosive blaze. Perhaps he could use the fire's combustion to use up all the oxygen to put it out, but if something went wrong it would create a shockwave that would inflict

great damage on the nearby houses. In case of an oxygen shortage, it would probably end badly for Tatsuya as well.

So, he didn't target the whole house. The target of his decomposition was the pillar holding up the roof.

The blazing hideout collapsed in on itself as though it were being squashed.

The house had been reduced to rubble, and the flames suddenly vanished.

That wasn't surprising. It was fairly normal for magicians who excelled at fire-creation magic to also be proficient in fire-extinguishing magic as well. Whoever was emitting the ignition magic from inside the burning house had probably been wearing fireproof equipment, but even with that, it would have been impossible for them to remain in direct contact with the radial and convection heat of the flames for a long period of time.

Three human shadows pushed aside the rubble and stood.

The fireproof-armor-clad generators faced Tatsuya and fired "Ignition" at him all at once.

The Magic Sequences coiling around Tatsuya were projected in his field of vision.

Faster than the Magic Sequence could display its effectiveness, Tatsuya released Psions to counteract them.

The compression had been insufficient, but the combat-activated Psions acted in the same manner as Gram Demolition and easily blew away the Magic Sequences. It was a raw display of just how many Psions Tatsuya held.

Without so much as a pose, Tatsuya fired his Trident, which incorporated three consecutive Decomposition magic's.

The Event Interference "space" that the Generators had expanded crumbled away.

The information-reinforced armor that the Generators wore to protect themselves was blown away.

And finally, a round hole was opened in each of the Generator's chests.

The blood trickling from the holes had no force behind it.

And then Tatsuya pulled the trigger a second time.

The three generators, having had their hearts blown away, collapsed facing upward.

With his CAD still raised, Tatsuya drew closer to the rubble, stopping just one step away from it.

Yoshimi came running up behind Tatsuya, who was still looking down at the corpses. Her movements were graceful and swift, despite her seemingly unwieldy clothing that did not suit her real size.

Not just Yoshimi, either; the branch families who had concealed themselves slowly came out of their hiding spots.

The wailing of a faraway fire engine grew closer. The fire had already been extinguished. But that didn't mean that the fire engine would suddenly do a U-turn. They had to handle the removal of the rubble, as well.

Going past Tatsuya, Yoshimi stepped over the rubble, which had not only been extinguished but had all the heat removed from it, drawing closer to the corpses. The other squad members also gathered to guard over the remaining corpses.

Lingering over the now-prone Generators was a faint twinkling of Psion light.

The activation of a delayed-activation Magic Sequence. The key for its activation was most likely the death of the Sequence's target.

Tatsuya immediately raised the CAD in his right hand.

The heartless Generators sprung to their feet and immediately assaulted anyone in range. Yoshimi was one of the targets.

——A technique that converted corpses into puppets, Necromancy.

Yoshimi reflexively attempted to retreat backwards but her foot caught on the rubble and she tumbled over.

Evasion-type magic would not make it in time.

Tatsuya pointed the CAD at the corpse assaulting Yoshimi and squeezed the trigger.

——Gram Demolition, the magic that erases the information body itself.

The Psion light within the Generators dispersed and vanished.

The three Generators fell over onto the rubble once more, their arms still raised up overhead.

The puppets had been returned to corpses once more.

"Thank you… very much."

As she looked back, Yoshimi's facial expression could not be seen under her sunglasses and muffler, but her shaky voice was a mix of relief and gratitude.

"It should be safe now."

Yoshimi nodded at Tatsuya, then turned to the squad members and ordered them to take the corpses away.

Tatsuya left Yoshimi and the others to do their work, then found his favorite scooter and left the area.

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Although Gu Jie had escaped this time, Tatsuya was still in the lead among the ones who were trying to locate the perpetrator of the Hakone terrorism incident.

Officer Chiba Toshikazu, who had also been selected as part of the terrorist hunt, had yet to even find the slightest trace of those responsible, and was busy hunting for clues.

He had gone to Hakone as a matter of principle to investigate the site of the incident. Toshikazu went wide-eyed in shock as he received a call from an unexpected caller, and he placed the transmission unit against his ear.

"Hello Officer Chiba, this is Fujibayashi speaking."

The voice coming from the receiver was certainly Fujibayashi. It was unthinkable that someone had broken into the communication infrastructure and was impersonating Fujibayashi, but it was such a surprising call for Chiba that such a doubt crossed his mind.

"My apologies for interrupting you on the job."

"It's not a problem at all. I'm more than happy to take a call from you any time, Fujibayashi-san. What can I do for you?"

Inagaki was waving his hands and coming over but Toshikazu quickly chased him off; Toshikazu quickly took himself away from the group of investigators.

"Ah, no errands today, but… I am a bit concerned about what happened yesterday."

"And is it to that concern that I owe the honor of speaking to you today?"

Paying no mind to the unpleasant circumstances, Toshikazu felt absolutely exhilarated.

"Yes. After you met the "Doll Master", did you notice anything unusual?"

"Unusual…? Well, I listened to his near-endless crazy story about necromancy that wasn't even useful for the investigation, which wore me out…"

"Ah, not about that… Perhaps, did you get a headache, or did you have trouble sleeping last night?"

"I don't think I noticed anything like that."

In his elation, he sarcastically thought "It's not like I'm in middle or high school or something," but not a hint of this crept into his voice, laughing in the easygoing way Toshikazu always did.

"I see…"

The person on the other end of the line seemed quite relieved.

Toshikazu was grinning without even realizing it. He didn't even hear Inagaki mutter "What's with him? What a weird look."

"Were you worried about me?"

"…I was. But it seems that I was worrying over nothing."

Fujibayashi's voice sounded slightly embarrassed, and Toshikazu's lips slowly loosened.

"Well then, Inspector, I will be praying that you catch our terrorist culprit as soon as possible."

"I appreciate it. Good luck on your work as well, Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi."

Finished with his phone call, Toshikazu returned to his original spot with a big grin on his face.

"Inagaki, what's the matter? You don't look so good."

"I just started feeling tired all of a sudden. I'm fine, don't worry about it."

Inagaki felt a headache coming on, massaging his temples with his fingers.

"Don't push yourself too hard."

Toshikazu said as such with the same flashy gesture as always, and with a chuckle, he left Inagaki's side.

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Having finished her call with Toshikazu, Fujibayashi turned her attention to the noncommissioned female officer staring at a monitor in front of her.

"There's no evidence of mental interference."

The officer raised her head and announced the results of the analysis to Kazama.

The girl was a specialist in mental analysis who was especially proficient in discovering brainwashed officers and removing brainwashing. By using responses to questions, she could detect brainwashing through changes in voice pitch, intonation, speaking speed, breathing intervals, eyeball movements, heart rate, and body temperature. Even in the current situation where she was limited to voice-only communication, by utilizing a for-military-use acoustics analysis device, she could even read heart rate. As a specialist, she was able to detect whether an individual was under suggestion or not.

"Is Oumi Kazukiyo clear?"

With a nod, Kazama stated "Good work" to the specialist. She stood up and bowed, then pushed the wagon containing the special equipment out of the room.

"This is not a job you enjoy doing, is it Fujibayashi?"

"I don't mind… but Commander, that was rather dangerous, wasn't it? The Chiba Family are authorities on Modern magic and that technique we just used is prejudiced towards physical body manipulation. We have no idea how much resistance they have to mental interference. "

In fact, Toshikazu had been sent after the "Doll master" by direct order from the Major General, Commander Saeki. It wasn't because she was trying to harm Toshikazu. When the police were dispatched to investigate the Hakone terrorism event and the corpse manipulation specialist behind it, in order to guide them to the Magician who was suspected of having connections to the remnants of the Kunlunfang Institute, they gave lists of suspects to a number of informants so that those lists could be disseminated.

Roter Wald was one of those locations, but the manager had in fact not cooperated with Kazama or his subordinates. The informant had been completely random in who they referenced. Fujibayashi frequented Roter Wald for a few days in an effort to follow their plans, but it had been complete coincidence that the manager had introduced her to Oumi Kazukiyo.

Thus, Fujibayashi had not used Toshikazu as bait, but the feeling that she had done as such weighed on her mind.

"If they do anything that exposes the collaborators, wouldn't it be better for us to join in the terrorist incident investigation as well?"

"First Lieutenant. My squadron… no, my battalion will have nothing to do with the Hakone terrorist incident. That is an executive decision by Commander Saeki."

"I understand…"

"The 101st Battalion must avoid being seen as supporting the Ten Master Clans."

"Yes, I understand."

The 101st Battalion, established by Commander Saeki, was starting to oppose being the civilian magical military force of the Ten Master Clans. Saeki was considered the political rival of retired Major General Kudou, and although she herself did not see it that way, the reality was that the "Anti-Ten Master Clans" and "Anti-Kudou Retsu" bases within

the National Defense Force had become a cornerstone of her support base.

However, in the background, the 101st Battalion had a cooperative relationship with the Yotsuba Family, the leading figures among the Ten Master Clans. With just that relationship, they still had plenty of excuses if they were exposed, but they could not afford to be seen as colluding with the Ten Master Clans.

"Thank you for your work, First Lieutenant."

"Sir. If you'll excuse me."

Fujibayashi bowed to Kazama and exited the room.

As a battalion adjutant, Fujibayashi had her own office, even if it was a bit small. It was her personal room, located right next to the Commander's room (i.e. Kazuma's room).

Fujibayashi sat in front of the desk and pondered about the phone conversation from earlier.

The battalion had not mandated the information provided to the informants, and a high-level informant such as Roter Wald's manager had easily ignored the Defense Force's pressure. Even without her intervention, it seemed like Toshikazu had gone straight to the "Doll Master's" location. However, the matter wasn't as clear-cut as that.

When she thought calmly about the details, Fujibayashi could also be said to be covering for Toshikazu out of concern for his potential brainwashing. However, the battalion had intercepted Toshikazu's phone call, so they had certainly used him as well. She couldn't sweep away her feelings of guilt.

As she thought about the phone conversation, she wasn't able to hold back her laughter.

Toshikazu had called her "Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi." It was very clear that he hadn't heard about her promotion.

Although the military and the police force were two separate organizations, promotions were published in the official daily newspaper. If Toshikazu had an interest in Fujibayashi, it wouldn't have been unusual for him to know about it. All he had to do was enter her name in the search agent.

(When he approached me last fall, he seemed so enthusiastic, but… maybe that was just a fluke, huh.)

(Although, back then I mislead him with my suggestive behavior as well… We were both playing the same game, I suppose.)

Fujibayashi thought about this, then with a laugh, she put it behind her.

She dismissed the pang of loneliness she felt as a figment of her imagination.

Chapter 8

Sunday, February10th. The time was almost 3 P.M.

Tatsuya took Miyuki with him as they visited the Kitayama Family's mansion. No, it would probably be more accurate to say that it was Miyuki who was taking Tatsuya there.

The reason that the siblings were visiting the Kitayama Family was because Shizuku had invited Miyuki yesterday in the classroom. At first, Miyuki thought that it might have been an invitation to a formal Tea Ceremony, which was why she intended to wear a furisode (long-sleeved kimono). But when Shizuku had cleared up the misunderstanding by saying ‘I just meant having regular tea', Miyuki had blushed in embarrassment.

The two of them kept their shoes on as they entered an elegant Western-style room. Looking at the painting that hung on the wall and the vase on display, Tatsuya couldn't help but wonder, ‘Just how much did these cost?' However, he immediately brushed that thought aside. Tatsuya and Miyuki weren't children anymore, so he wasn't anxious about breaking something. However, he thought that if he paid too much attention to the value of those items, it would prevent him from feeling at ease.

When they entered, Shizuku was already seated. Shizuku's outfit was composed of a one-piece long-sleeved dress that fell to her knees, and a collar that covered her neck. She was also wearing high-heeled pumps. It wasn't an outfit as formal as something like an "afternoon dress" but it wasn't a mistake to say that she had probably put some thought into it.

In fact, Miyuki was dressed in a very similar manner. Tatsuya had received Miyuki's advice as to whether or not he should come dressed casually or formally, but still, he couldn't help but secretly feel relieved at not having misread the mood of this gathering.

In the end, Tatsuya had chosen a simple dark suit. He had considered coming in his school uniform but decided against it, and had instead opted for a suit that would match Miyuki's clothing style.

Seeing Tatsuya and Miyuki, Shizuku stood up.

"Welcome and thank you for responding to the invitation."

Clasping both of her hands at her abdomen, Shizuku performed a courteous bow, which was quite an excessively formal greeting.

"Thank you for inviting us."

Matching Shizuku's gesture, Tatsuya returned a well-mannered response, though he was somewhat lacking in grace. Miyuki followed after her brother half a second later. It was a graceful, impeccable bow.

"Please."

Shizuku urged Tatsuya to sit. Her concise way of speaking hadn't changed, however, and her actions were twice as polite as usual. There must have been a reason for Shizuku to have fully entered ‘Young Mistress Mode' today.

Shizuku signaled using her eyes to a nearby maid who had been waiting patiently. Despite being a maid, she was already in the first half of her thirties. Her face was agreeable, but it only took a glance for Tatsuya and Miyuki to understand that this woman had not been chosen for her outward appearance. Rather, it was her skill.

The sound of boiling water could be heard not long after she elegantly placed the kettle on the electromagnetic cooker and turned it on. It was highly likely that before boiling, the already-hot water had been prepared.

The maid took a teapot out of the insulation device. She then put tea leaves in the pot that was now hot enough.

She stopped the electromagnetic cooker immediately after the hot water started to boil, and after which, she then poured the hot water into the pot that contained the tea leaves.

Promptly covering the teapot with the lid, the maid cast her gaze downward and took a step back.

"Tatsuya-san, if you prefer coffee, I can have it prepared immediately."

Her manner of speaking was the same as always. However, the mood was different. It looked like Shizuku was slightly nervous.

"No, I happen to like tea as well."

For now, Tatsuya also returned an answer with the same tone as always. He opted against trying to inquire as to why she was so tense. He would probably understand pretty soon anyway so he didn't see any reason to press the issue.

"By the way, Shizuku."

Following Tatsuya, Miyuki also spoke in her usual tone.

"Is Honoka not coming today?"

"Umm… Yes, well…"

Shizuku remained evasive, implying that she'd prefer it if they didn't ask.

Shizuku was at a loss for words. Miyuki, whose social etiquette was the highest of the three, knew better than to try and force an answer.

"Ojou-sama."

Amidst the silence, unexpectedly, the maid who had been staying silently behind Shizuku spoke up.

"Eh, ah, thank you."

It was a warning to not let the tea steam too much. Shizuku opened the lid of the pot, stirred the contents for a bit with her spoon, then pulled the lid over it again.

After that, she took the ceramic tea-strainer, lifted the pot, then evenly filled the three tea cups in front of her. The cup filled until the last drop went to Tatsuya, and the nearby cup was placed in front of Miyuki.

"Please."

"Thank you."

Tatsuya voiced his gratitude while Miyuki silently bowed.

"It's delicious."

Miyuki was the first to voice her opinion, to which Tatsuya strongly nodded.

"Shizuku, you're not only skilled with green tea but with black tea as well."

"It's nothing much…"

Shizuku was slightly embarrassed and averted her gaze.

"Miyuki, have you already tasted tea made by Shizuku?"

"Yes, Onii-sama. The green tea that Shizuku prepares is delicious, too."

"…Miyuki's was better."

With a curt expression, quite obviously to hide her embarrassment, she answered so as she brought her gaze to Miyuki.

"Miyuki, Onii-sama?"

"Eh? Ah…"

Miyuki didn't immediately understand what Shizuku wanted to say. She quickly understood that the question was ‘You're calling your older cousin Onii-sama?'.

However, this was a rather natural question. At school, Shizuku had witnessed Miyuki call Tatsuya ‘Onii-sama' countless times already.

"I have been addressing him that way since junior high school so… You can say that it has become a habit."

Still, Miyuki answered politely. Maybe it was because she felt slightly guilty that she went as far as to add an explanation.

Which invited another question.

"Since junior high school?"

"Yes, umm, a lot happened."

Miyuki answered ambiguously. She had started to call Tatsuya ‘Onii-sama' following the events in the summer at Okinawa when she was in her first year of junior high school. Before that, her mother had forbidden them from acting like a brother and a sister.

Even though she had been a child who didn't know anything, the very memory of her selfish behavior towards her beloved brother caused her to feel uncontrollable disgust. Those were days of her life that she'd rather forget. Moreover, the exact events of this affair had to be kept secret from others.

An awkward silence invaded the place once more.

However, a well-timed knock from the door saved them from the atmosphere.

A maid, different from the one who helped with the preparations of the tea, opened the door.

"Ojou-sama, Danna-sama (Master) is here."

"Let him come in."

Without asking for Tatsuya and Miyuki's opinion, she answered right away.

It seemed that today's invitation had come from Shizuku's father, Tatsuya immediately thought.

"Forgive me for interrupting in the middle of your conversation."

Shizuku's father, Kitayama Ushio, stood next to Shizuku and greeted Tatsuya and Miyuki, who had already stood up as a sign of respect. Even though Ushio was wearing a buttoned-down shirt with a double-knitted jacket, it couldn't be said that it gave an untidy impression.

"We should be the ones saying that, forgive us for intruding."

If Ushio was indeed the one who had invited Tatsuya and Miyuki, then it would have been appropriate to thank him for it. However, Tatsuya kept acting as if it had been his daughter that had invited them. Keeping it

that way would probably make for an easier interaction, Tatsuya thought.

For a mover-and-shaker of the economic world to employ such roundabout ways, Tatsuya couldn't help but wonder what exactly it was that he wanted. Tatsuya wasn't so much excited as cautious about the whole deal. They weren't mere high school students anymore. The top companies in the world might want to make an ally out of the Yotsuba, and even just making their enemies aware of such a relationship would be advantageous.

Tatsuya was once approached by Shizuku's mother. However, a mother's worry had prompted her to act that way in order to protect her daughter from a possibly undesirable person they knew nothing about, so she had questioned him. Tatsuya was under the impression Ushio wouldn't do the same.

"Not at all, I'm the one intruding on a gathering of young people, after all."

"There is nothing strange or impolite in what you did. On the other hand, we came here without extending a greeting to you. We are terribly sorry."

"Shizuku was the one who invited you, do not worry about such things. To begin with, there is no such need in this house. Incidentally, there happens to be something I'd like to talk with you about."

"If it's alright with you."

"That's a relief. Please, let's sit down and talk then."

After saying so, Ushio took the seat opposite Tatsuya's. A moment after, Tatsuya, Miyuki and Shizuku sat down.

"Well then, there is but one thing to talk about. That is, the negative campaign towards Magicians."

Although this subject had been well within what Tatsuya expected, the fact that Ushio got down to business immediately surprised him a little.

"Both my wife and daughter are Magicians. I can't help being concerned. With the current tendency of people to hate Magicians on sight, I'd like to know what the Ten Master Clans plan on doing."

"Even though I can't give too many details on the matter, it was only before New Year's Eve that I was officially recognized as a member of the Yotsuba. Also, Miyuki lived separated from the Main House. We're far from being in a position wherein we are aware of the Ten Master Clans' decisions.

Ushio nodded with a calm expression. There wasn't a trace of suspicion in his gaze as Tatsuya answered him.

"I see. I heard from my wife that the leaders of the Japanese Magic Community have different rules and customs."

Tatsuya lightly nodded to confirm Ushio's words.

That was not to say that Ushio was done.

"Still, there's no way you haven't heard anything, right? Can you at least tell me if they actually plan on interfering?"

The only matters that Tatsuya was aware of were things related to his own mission. But it wasn't particularly stated that he wasn't allowed to talk about the contents of said mission.

"Even though it might be something that you are already aware of since it was made public, the Ten Master Clans are looking for the mastermind behind the terrorist attack. It has been decided that the culprit will be handed over to the police but I will join in the search as well."

"I see. The declaration made by the Japanese Magic Community will soon be carried out, then. Will measures be taken against this anti-Magician crusade?"

"I haven't heard anything in that regard."

"I see…"

Ushio let out a deep sigh after hearing Tatsuya's answer. A teacup was placed in front of him by a maid who had been on standby near him.

Ushio thanked the maid with a quick glance and quenched his thirst with the presented drink.

"Like I said previously, I cannot just shrug off this anti-Magic movement as if it was someone else's problem. If the Ten Master Clans need help, then I can cooperate to deal with the media."

With the backup of the Kitayama group, it's certain that they'd get considerable influence over the media. Even if the antagonistic trend couldn't be reversed instantly, weakening it would be possible.

Tatsuya deemed this a desirable offer. He knew how powerful public opinion truly was. Even the Yotsuba couldn't survive without the support of the Japanese community. In today's World, there was no room for an independent country where Magicians were in charge.

"Unfortunately, I am not in a position wherein I can speak or represent the will of the Ten Master Clans. Neither I nor Miyuki are allowed to represent the Yotsuba Family at the Master Clans Conference, either."

However, Tatsuya's answer was a neutral one.

"Moreover, I think that in the current situation, intervening on behalf of the Magicians with the media would be undesirable for Kitayama-san. Taking Shizuku-san into account, this only strengthens my opinion."

A sharp light emerged from Ushio's eyes. Until then, he had been wearing the face of a father, but right now, it was probably the face of one of the pillars of the business world.

"Now, I have to wonder why?"

"The anti-Magician movement is much like an anti-socialist movement. It would be no mistake to say that Magicians are currently an outlet for the dissatisfaction of society. Even under normal circumstances, Kitayama-san is already the target of jealousy and discontent due to your thriving business, so I think that we shouldn't give activists even more material to be agitated about. These people don't discriminate. Not only your wife and Shizuku-san, even you and possibly Wataru-kun could be exposed to their malice."

Ushio took the tea cup and brought it to his mouth.

It wasn't because he was thirsty, but because he wanted to evaluate Tatsuya's speech thoroughly.

"…Even though I think categorizing all the criticism towards Magicians as anarchism is dangerous, I understand that you are worried about the well-being of my children. Still, are you fine with this?"

"If Magicians… No, if students of First High ever become victims of malicious acts or crimes, then it is quite likely that I will ask for your help."

"…So you're saying that you have no intention to prevent the damage before it actually occurs?"

"It is impossible to follow the actions of every student outside of the school. We could encourage prudence, but anything beyond that would be difficult."

"That is certainly the case."

Ushio turned a fleeting glance of appraisal towards Tatsuya.

It however quickly disappeared behind a composed and smiling face.

"I understand your stance. I will exert caution as well. However, if the situation ever degrades, feel free to come and consult me anytime. I might sound persistent, but again, this isn't just someone else's problem for me."

"Understood. When that happens, I will be counting on you."

While bowing his head in respect towards Tatsuya, Ushio stood up.

"I'm done troubling you. Please, enjoy yourselves."

Leaving such parting words to Tatsuya and Miyuki who had stood up as well to bow, Ushio left the room.

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Tatsuya had refused Ushio's offer because it wasn't his duty to handle the media.

It wasn't like the Ten Master Clans thought that intervening in this matter was unnecessary, though. On the night of the day Tatsuya and Miyuki visited the Kitayama mansion, Kouichi invited Congressman Ueno to an expensive restaurant.

Congressman Ueno was a young politician of the government based in Tokyo who was known for being friendly towards Magicians. Not too long ago, it was said that he would ascend to the post of Minister. However, with the recent anti-Magician trend, he had suffered quite the setback and was now in a tricky position. Still, it wasn't like he could just jump ship and change his camp, it was much too late for that. Due to this, he had to remain passive for the last few days.

After the garçon (waiter) brought Kouichi a cup of coffee, he then instructed him to not let anyone enter for a while and to close the door behind him.

"Did you enjoy the meal?"

"Yes, it was delicious."

"Glad to hear it. I will transmit your praise to the Chef."

"Don't trouble yourself with that, I will tell him myself. Recently, there has been quite a bit of eavesdropping and spying in Akasaka and Shinbashi, so I couldn't find the time to properly relax. This sort of establishment is quite useful."

Kouichi and Ueno were both roughly the same age. The conversation between them was always smooth and natural.

"Well then, Saegusa-san. Shall we talk about the real reason for my presence here?"

The one who ended the ceremonies to get down to business was Ueno.

"If I had to venture a guess, I would say that it's about the media?"

"As expected of Ueno-sensei. You hit the nail on the head."

Kouichi nonchalantly flattered Ueno. However, Ueno only displayed a wry smile. With the current situation in mind, there wasn't really anything else Kouichi would want to talk to him about. He didn't feel awkward about it, but he was conscious of the fact that it had been something rather easy to guess. He didn't feel like the praise was warranted.

"This is a request from none other than Saegusa-san himself. I am ready to take some risks as well. Should we put some pressure on the media? Or should we try to turn the hate towards the terrorists by saying the Magicians are also victims in the affair?"

Ueno was broadly grinning. Even though as a politician he was still rather young, he had already acquired quite the knowledge and experience in the power struggle that he had to go through to enter the government.

"No, I don't plan on asking for something so unreasonable."

However, Kouichi was apparently against this strategy. If Kouichi had accepted Ueno's proposal, it'd have been a consequent debt, which Ueno might have planned on using in the future to be granted various services from the powerful Saegusa family.

Currently, out of all the Ten Master Clans leaders, it was no doubt Kouichi who possessed the most experience in negotiations. Seizing the initiative against someone like Kouichi was something Ueno simply wasn't good enough to do.

"What I'd like to ask of Ueno-sensei is to take extreme care that, if any Magician is ever harmed due to the actions of the anti-Magician group, such a crime wouldn't go unpunished."

Kouichi's request was a fairly small one compared to Ueno's proposal from before.

"Not forgiving a crime is par for the course but… Is this really all you want of me?"

Kouichi smiled and shook his head at Ueno's incredulity.

"A society where the natural matters are dealt with the way they should be is exactly what every citizen hopes for, Ueno-sensei. For instance, if students of First High were injured by activists of the anti-Magician group, even if the victim would be the Magicians, an excuse such as "self-defense" could be used to make them the culprits instead."

"No, surely these kind of things…"

"Are you sure?"

Ueno felt like he had been caught in an illusion, seeing Kouichi's artificial eye letting out a suspicious light even through his sunglasses. It seems he had been caught up in the atmosphere.

"Since there was a possibility of being threatened if I decided to use Magic, in order to protect myself, I resorted to violence. …Can you really say that neither the media nor the usual anti-Magic community would support such a reason?"

Seeing Kouichi's discreet smile, Ueno couldn't help but swallow his breath.

"If they start out with threats and harassment, and Magicians react even the slightest in return, the anti-Magicians could resort to violence and defend themselves with that kind of self-serving claim. And with the media and politicians backing them, it would only increase their sense of superiority. Can you honestly tell me that won't happen?"

"This is…"

"Spreading false information and revealing illegal acts that a group has done, then threatening them and inciting violence towards them… It's not an unusual way to crush an opponent party and their reputation. However, we can't allow Magicians to be on the receiving end of such a farce. I fear that this country may end up in a deplorable situation, one where Magicians are all but ignored if they complain about injury, damage, or the like.

"Saegusa-san, don't tell me you…"

Ueno's voice trembled. He wasn't afraid about the situation Kouichi described possibly becoming a reality. Rather…

"Are you thinking about sacrificing students of Magic High Schools and Universities to reverse the public opinion…?"

The faint smile of Kouichi disappeared, he looked at Ueno.

"If nothing happens, then there will be nothing to worry about. But it is still impossible to halt unjustified acts against Magicians before they occur."

Locking eyes with Ueno, Kouichi's smile deepened.

"Even if the police decided to keep a close watch, it's not like they would be really able to interfere until a real problem popped up. Therefore, if such a thing happens, it must be dealt with quickly and fairly, as all affairs should be, even if the victims were to be Magicians. Ueno-sensei, I will count on your cooperation."

"…Understood."

Returning an answer that had a lot of trouble coming out, Kouichi looked at Ueno with a suspicious smile once more.

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Monday, February 11th. As usual, Tatsuya was headed to school accompanied by Miyuki and Minami. While he was going to his classroom, he felt a strange atmosphere on the school grounds.

On the day following Gu Jie's declaration about the recent terrorist acts being his doing, the atmosphere had been quite tense. However, it wasn't exactly the same this time. Although anxiety was definitely part of the mix, you could feel that curiosity was the prevalent sentiment. If you

were to strictly compare the general mood, it was pretty similar to when Lina had come to study here.

The classroom of Class 2-E was no exception.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Mizuki. It seems like everyone is restless, did something happen?"

While returning her greeting, Tatsuya asked Mizuki if she had any information about this phenomenon.

"I, too, can't say for sure but… It appears that Ichijou-san from Third High has come to our school."

"Ichijou?"

Even though he did not rise his voice too loud, it was a fact that even Tatsuya couldn't help but be surprised.

Had Masaki just come to Tokyo, then it wouldn't have been that surprising. Tatsuya had heard from Maya that he was participating in the terrorist search under Katsuto's guidance. That is why him leaving school for a while and staying here was in the range of predictable events.

Still, there should have been no need for him to come to First High. After all, Hachioji, where First High was situated, was quite a distance away from Tokyo where the residence of the Juumonji family was located. The Magic University where Katsuto was currently studying at was at Nerima, which was also pretty far away. It was difficult to think of his visit to First High as incidental.

It couldn't be that he is going to transfer to First High…?

"From whom did you hear this story, Mizuki?"

"From me."

The answer came from behind Tatsuya. She didn't come from her usual place near the window, but from the entrance of the classroom of Class-E and stood behind him.

"Good morning Erika. So, have you seen Ichijou?"

Tatsuya asked so, turning around.

"Although, it's not like I saw him with my own eyes or anything."

Erika gave up trying to surprise Tatsuya, and answered his inquiry with a bored face.

"Ichijou-kun was taken by the Vice-Principal to the Principal's office, or so people say. I asked around to see if this wasn't just a joke, but apparently pretty much everyone has the same version of the story, so there's probably no mistake."

Erika had a lot more acquaintances than Tatsuya. If you were talking strictly about how many people knew them, then Tatsuya came out on top. However, in terms of having a social life in First High, Erika was leaps and bounds ahead.

This was information gathered by Erika from her asking around. So it's true that Masaki came to First High then, Tatsuya thought.

"The Principal's office, then…?"

The story about the Vice-Principal taking him to the Principal's office was also probably true. Tatsuya thought about the possibility of it being for ‘That' scenario that he had imagined.

Miyuki wasn't a person who enjoyed themselves in speculating about other's affairs in the way Tatsuya did.

"Everyone, as you probably all already know, Ichijou-kun from Third High will be staying at a house in Tokyo for about a month…"

It was not simply a guidance teacher from Class-A that was now talking, but the Vice-Principal Yaosaka himself, and right next to him was Ichijou Masaki.

The fact that Masaki was present was already quite the shock, but associating this with the fact that it was the Vice-Principal himself who was doing the explanation, it managed to overload the students to the point his words took a while to actually register.

Even though no one dared to whisper to each other while the Vice-Principal was there, a restless atmosphere permeated the classroom. This mood was even further strengthened when Yaosaka pronounced the words ‘Business related to his family'. There wasn't a single student in Class-A that didn't understand the meaning of those words. House, in other words, Ichijou Family's business. The students knew that, without a doubt, this was related to the other day's terrorism events.

However, there was a distinct difference in enthusiasm between the gazes that the boys threw at him and the gazes of the girls.

"Vice-Principal. Does that mean that Ichijou-san will transfer from Third High to our class?"

One of the schoolgirls raised her hand, her question mixing curiosity and hope.

This was something Yaosaka had already explained, but he persevered and repeated once more.

"There will be no transfer. As you probably understand from his uniform, Ichijou will remain in Third High's registry. However, since he will not be able to follow his course from here, for a time, using the network of Magic High Schools and Universities, he will follow Third High's curriculum using this class' terminals."

A second-year student from Class-A unfortunately dropped out two months ago. That person's desk had stayed empty.

"Even though practice sessions will be separated, he will study with everyone. No doubt it will become a good stimulus for everyone present,

Ichijou-kun included. I hope you will all get along and have friendly competition. Well then, Ichijou-kun…"

Urged on by Yaosaka, Masaki took a half step forward.

"My name is Ichijou Masaki, from Third High. This chance of studying together was due to the kindness of everyone from First High. It will only be for a short period of a single month but I look forward to cooperating with you."

At the same time Masaki bowed, a warm applause erupted in the classroom. Since Class 2-A already had experience with this sort of event with Lina's temporary visit last year, they were the class that was the most accustomed to the whole experience.

This fact weighed in Principal Momoyama's decision to put Masaki in Class-A.

It was absolutely not due to consideration for the recent proposal of the Ichijou Family to the Yotsuba Family.

——However, Miyuki couldn't help but view this in a dubious light.

While she openly clapped with the others and maintained her smile, she internally sighed.

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During that day's lunch period, Masaki didn't sit at the same table as Miyuki. He gave precedence to deepening his friendship with the males of his own class, Class-A, and was currently in Morisaki's group.

Watching from her seat in the distance, Erika muttered ‘surprising'.

"I thought he'd try to stick to Miyuki for sure…"

"If he did that, he'd probably be hated by both the guys and girls of his class."

Smiling wryly at Erika's blunt opinion, Mikihiko objected.

"Since Lina was a girl there wasn't really anything strange about her and Miyuki being together but Ichijou-san is a man so…"

Smiling as well, Honoka aligned with Mikihiko's opinion.

"Yeah I guess. Having your ass chased around by hordes of girls on your first day really gives you the image of prince right?"

"Erika-chan, that word…"

Though Mizuki slightly reproved Erika's ungraceful comment, consent was also mixed in.

Erika turned towards Mizuki with a mischievous smile on her face.

"Was there something strange in what I said?" "Ass is a bit…" "So ass is no good then. How about butt?" "Erika-chan…"

"What kind of person was Lina?"

While Erika and Mizuki had started to play around —— or more accurately, Erika had started to one-sidedly tease Mizuki —— Shizuku asked Honoka a question.

"Now that I think about it, we didn't really talk about Lina to Shizuku much."

Lina had moved to First High under the guise of a student exchange program, and that exchange partner had been, of course, Shizuku. Since they hadn't even met while moving to each other's countries, Shizuku basically knew nothing of Lina.

"I heard that she was a blond-haired beauty.

"That's true. Golden hair and blue azure eyes, such bright colors. She was really cute."

"More than Miyuki?"

"Eh? No way."

Honoka had instinctively answered, so she was stealing glances at Miyuki who was smiling with a troubled face.

"Umm, maybe their types were different? I mean, Miyuki is in the "beautiful" category."

Seeing Miyuki becoming more and more perplexed, Shizuku actively nodded to Honoka's words. As expected of best friends, this pattern in their behavior suited them well.

"However, if I had to put Lina in a category, it'd be "lovely". Her face was like that of an expensive doll's, but at the same time she was… friendly, easy to talk to… cheerful, bright, and definitely lively."

"I think those words are basically the same."

"Ugh… A-anyway, she gave off what you'd call an American vibe."

"That is rather rude to Americans in general…"

"Overall I guess she would be a good match for Miyuki!"

Honoka dodged Shizuku's heated argument,

"Her Magical power was also amazing. She was a good match for Miyuki in that aspect as well!"

Such was her conclusion.

"Equal to Miyuki? That's impressive."

Shizuku was genuinely interested about that part, so that sentence of hers wasn't meant to tease.

"Considering she had been sent, in a sense, as a representative of the USNA, it was to be expected."

Hearing Tatsuya, Leo and Erika couldn't help but put on a grin. Both of them, however, firmly understood that Lina's identity was to be kept a secret. They wouldn't do something as stupid as mouthing off in a place where someone might hear them.

Not knowing about Lina's identity, Shizuku tilted her head in wonder at seeing Erika and the others' smiling faces.

"Putting aside her Magical prowess, she was quite an entertaining person. Shizuku would've certainly liked her too. ——She was pretty vulnerable to heated arguments."

Before the conversation could shift in an unwanted direction, Tatsuya gave a casual remark.

"Tatsuya-san. I'm not the high-king of tsukkomi."

"Onii-sama… I think this is rather rude to both Shizuku and Lina."

Receiving successive objections from Shizuku and Miyuki, Tatsuya apologized with a "My bad" while smiling.

"Still, to think Ichijou-kun would come to First High, I never imagined this even in my dreams. Was a clear reason given for his transfer?"

Thinking that the subject of Lina had run its course, Mikihiko asked the three people from Class-A about something that had been on his mind since this morning. ——The reason he used an overly polite tone was because, of course, those three students included Miyuki.

"He's not transferring, though."

"Due to matters concerning his family, he's going to stay in Tokyo for a while. It looks like he is going to follow Third High's theory course online using our terminals. That's why he's not wearing First High's uniform, but the uniform from Third High."

"By family business, does that mean the Ichijou Family?"

Hearing Honoka's explanation, Mikihiko turned a frowning gaze towards Tatsuya.

"With the recent events in mind, he might be here for something relevant to the terrorist attacks… Tatsuya, do you know something?"

Receiving a direct question, Tatsuya did not lie nor did he use his right to stay silent.

"Do you know about the recent declaration made by the Magic Community?"

"Umm, you mean the one about searching for the terrorist mastermind?"

"Ichijou came to Tokyo for that reason. And while I'm at it, I'm going to add that Saegusa-senpai, Juumonji-senpai and myself will join the search."

This was, in part, to show the World that the Ten Master Clans wouldn't sit by and forgive acts of terrorism. It was one of the things declared to the media by the Magic Community. Since Tatsuya understood that much, there was no real reason to keep it a secret.

"I see… say, Tatsuya."

"What is it?"

"Umm, can I help?"

Mikihiko's reaction, however, was fairly unexpected for Tatsuya.

It was more of a retaliation for the terrorist act against the Ten Master Clans —— They weren't exactly looking for Gu Jie. Moreover, homicide, casualties and the like, these were normally jobs for the police. Even if they were the Ten Master Clans, there is such a thing as overstepping their authority.

The Ten Master Clans were cooperating with the police to change the current opinion on Magicians. If they borrowed the help of someone outside of the Ten Master Clans, it wouldn't have nearly the same impact.

"I'd rather have you take care of the anti-Magician group's actions."

Tatsuya oriented Mikihiko's concern in another direction. It wasn't just for the sake of changing the subject or anything, it was a problem that needed attention as well.

"The anti-Magician group?"

"Weren't you the one who talked about students being observed and also being victims of abusive language?"

"Ah, yeah. You're talking about that."

It was Monday, during the second week of this term, he was talking about the content of a report made by the disciplinary committee.

"…It was a brief conversation, but you remembered it well, huh?"

"I was actually just thinking that you may have forgotten about it."

Hearing those unexpected harsh words from Tatsuya, Mikihiko blinked several times.

"This happened before the terrorist attacks. Right now, the public opinion of Magicians is in a critical situation, and to begin with, Humanists don't exactly think highly of us. So coupled with the recent happenings, there is a possibility that direct violence might be employed against the students."

Tatsuya's way of concluding matters was to strengthen Mikihiko's sense of the incoming crisis. When Tatsuya thought that Mikihiko was quietly pondering, he had in fact taken out his terminal to check some data.

"There is no report of assault yet… Still, it's true that the number of harassment cases happening outside of the school has clearly increased…"

The data Mikihiko was currently poring over was a damage report that the disciplinary committee had gathered.

"I'm sorry, Tatsuya. Looks like I really screwed up. Until now, I was only paying attention to the school's interior."

Even though Mikihiko was blaming himself, one couldn't help but sympathize with him. Ever since the terrorist's (Gu Jie) declaration on Wednesday of last week, the students were fairly agitated, anxious even. Quarrels would erupt within the school grounds at the drop of a hat. Despite the fact that those were rare occurrences, there were cases where it even developed into scuffles between students. As a member of the

disciplinary committee, Mikihiko's priority was, of course, the troubles that happened within the school.

"Would you mind sharing this data with the Student Council? Until last week we had been counting the number of incidents, so I'd like to compare with yours."

Despite saying that, since the voices of concern came from the students themselves, he had to report to the staff room at the very least. What Tatsuya meant was that he wanted to write a report on the consultations made to the disciplinary committee rather than the Student Council.

"Understood. I will do my best so that Tatsuya can concentrate on his duty."

"He's counting on you, disciplinary committee chairman!"

Erika cheered on a Mikihiko who was nodding with motivation. Even though her tone had been half-joking, Mikihiko understood that she was genuinely encouraging him.

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After the class ended, Tatsuya decided to visit Class 2-A's room.

"Onii-sama, did you come to get me?"

Miyuki, who perceived his approach, went out to meet Tatsuya in the hallway. For Tatsuya, who should've been going towards the student council's room, it was unusual for him to come and get Miyuki.

"Yeah. I also have a few things to talk about with Ichijou."

However, Tatsuya's answer disappointed Miyuki slightly.

"Ichijou-san? Understood. I will call him."

Still, she didn't show her disappointment. Miyuki showed a smile and went back to her classroom.

Her smile gave Tatsuya a sense of discomfort.

It wasn't the first time this had happened. He saw that smile a few times already this year, it was a different smile from before. This sensation reminded Tatsuya of the Yotsuba Family's ‘New Year's Meeting'.

That event caused an undesirable change in Miyuki. Tatsuya's intuition told him not to ignore this matter as it might cause unwanted trouble.

However, he wasn't allowed to ponder on the issue right now.

"Shiba-san, thank you very much… Shiba, what do you want?"

Right now, he had to give priority to Masaki.

"Ichijou, are you aware that Juumonji-senpai is planning a meeting to talk about our mission?"

Tatsuya didn't need to explain in detail what this mission was about. As members of the Ten Master Clans, both of them knew that they had been ordered to search for the mastermind behind the terrorist attacks.

"No, this is the first I have heard of it but…"

However, since Masaki had just come to Tokyo, he did not know about it.

"Well, even if I say a meeting, it will be more like an exchange of currently known information between Juumonji-senpai, Saegusa-senpai and myself. You should come along as well."

"I see…"

Masaki pondered over Tatsuya's invitation. It didn't take him that long to come up with an answer, just less than 10 seconds.

"If it's alright with you, allow me to participate."

Masaki fully understood that for this kind of investigation, communication and sharing information was important. What he was worried about was that if he, as a student of Third High, were to join a meeting composed exclusively of First High students, the mood might

be awkward. Though after realizing it wasn't the time to have such petty thoughts, he immediately came to a conclusion.

"I see. Today's meeting will be at 1800 Hours. I will send you the map, so please take out your terminal."

"A-alright."

With a slight feeling of surprise, Masaki took out his own personal digital assistant from his pocket. With this conversation flow, he had expected a "Then, let's go together" due to him being a Third High student. To be honest, Masaki wasn't thrilled with the prospect of walking together with his rival in love, so if he had been asked to follow him around, the offer would've been declined. He sort of lost his momentum at this anticlimactic result, since Tatsuya proposed a totally different course of action.

Masaki was also remembered that this wasn't Third High, and a slight feeling of loneliness invaded him.

"Did you receive all the data?"

Masaki's change of expression didn't escape Tatsuya's eyes. However, Tatsuya had no interest in what Masaki thought or felt. He asked in a business-like manner if he had received all the information needed.

"…No problem."

"Then, see you there at 1800 Hours."

After Masaki had nodded to his parting words, Tatsuya turned his attention to Miyuki.

"Miyuki, let's go?"

Even though Tatsuya was exempt from student council activities due to the search mission he was given, he thought that since he had come all the way to the classroom of Class-A, he could accompany Miyuki there.

"Yes."

After Miyuki nodded to Tatsuya with a smile on her face, she turned to Masaki to say goodbye.

"Then, Ichijou-san, we will be going."

"Do your best for the student council activities."

Masaki answered so with a meek face.

After seeing Masaki off, Tatsuya and Miyuki headed towards the Student Council room.

Even though Tatsuya had his back turned, he could feel his gaze.

There was no ignoring Masaki's subdued acrimony this time.

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At precisely 1800 Hours, Tatsuya went into the restaurant that Katsuto was waiting in. He left at 1900 Hours.

There was no progress to be reported today by any of them, either. They had shared information about the affair in Kamakura during the day. Of course, they only shared information they could freely talk about. That was why tonight's meeting ended after an explanation of the current investigation led by Masaki. Therefore, it was over in a time that was neither too short nor too long.

Afterwards, Katsuto, Mayumi and Masaki ate dinner together, but Tatsuya declined and went home. Of course he had also been invited, but they didn't insist after he had refused. Katsuto and Mayumi seemed to have considered Tatsuya and Masaki's antagonism due to Miyuki.

In the train that was bringing him back home, Tatsuya thought about Miyuki. She had forced a smile for a long period of time when he had come to get her after school at her classroom.

It was not like today was the first time he had noticed this. After they came back from the Yotsuba meeting of the New Year, it happened quite a few times, and it caused Tatsuya to feel anxious every time. However, since it looked like Miyuki didn't want Tatsuya to notice, he hadn't asked her about it until now.

However, after seeing her today, he couldn't stop thinking that way anymore. It was pretty easy to understand that she was forcing herself. Before solving the worry he had been having, Tatsuya thought it was necessary to talk to her.

While he went from his cabin to the commuter that would take him home, Tatsuya thought about how he should bring up the subject into their discussion.

Bluntly asking would be a bad move. Forcibly making Miyuki talk might hurt her as he wasn't aware of the nature nor the gravity of her worry. Leading her to it with other questions might be the same as forcing her in the end. It's not like she was a prisoner whose information needed to be extracted, and the purpose wasn't to learn about her worry.

Tatsuya stood before his own house, not having decided anything. Stepping forward, his hand that was extending towards the door knob was slightly slower than usual.

"Welcome home, Onii-sama. ——Did something happen? Are you feeling ill!?"

Usually, he would have already opened the door, but seeing him being slower than usual, Miyuki's face was drained of color.

"No, I was just thinking about something. I'm back, Miyuki."

‘What are you doing, worrying Miyuki that way…' thought Tatsuya.

It wasn't like he had his momentum taken away, but he still hadn't confronted Miyuki about it even as they finished dinner. It was already getting quite late.

After finishing his meal, Tatsuya declined a tea-time offer and went to take a bath. Feeling refreshed, he decided to try to talk to Miyuki once more.

When Tatsuya came back to the living room, he was met by a Miyuki who had put on a knee-length classic one-piece dress with frills. She had already removed the white apron that she had on a while ago.

"Onii-sama, I will make coffee immediately, please wait for a moment."

Even faster than Tatsuya could open his mouth, Miyuki quickly said so and left her seat.

Could it be that she is avoiding him? Tatsuya quickly denied this possibility.

He doesn't think that she is avoiding him.

Miyuki had seen through what he wanted to ask her, and didn't like it. That is what Tatsuya thought.

However, it was undeniable that the fact that this caused Tatsuya anxiety was something Miyuki was conscious about. As opposed to Tatsuya who only knew about a vague restlessness of hers, Miyuki perfectly understood the reason for his.

What on Earth could Miyuki be worried about…

"Sorry to have kept you waiting."

While Tatsuya was still throwing conjectures around, Miyuki entered the living room with a coffee tray. He was pulled out of his deep thinking by Miyuki, and he instinctively raised his face and looked at his watch.

Putting the coffee cups and the saucers on the table, Miyuki anxiously peered into Tatsuya's face.

"Umm, Onii-sama… Are you really feeling alright? Are you sure that you aren't tired? You seemed fairly distracted tonight."

Tatsuya wanted to click his tongue for his blunder. He had made Miyuki worry once more. This wasn't the time to be lost in thought, he said to himself.

"Miyuki, won't you sit for a moment?"

"Yes…?"

However, this was his chance. In this situation, although he thought it was slightly unfair, Miyuki wouldn't be able to run away or change the subject.

"What I'm worrying about Miyuki, is you."

If this had been last year, that sentence would've brought Miyuki immense joy.

However, as she was now, her eyes swam all over the place trying to avoid Tatsuya's gaze.

"What are you so worried about?"

Miyuki refused to look at him directly. Still, not stopping at that, Tatsuya went all in.

"I don't… such a thing."

Miyuki's answer had absolutely no persuasive power whatsoever. Understanding this fact herself, she wasn't only looking away, but was averting her whole face.

"Miyuki. Won't you tell me?"

Miyuki looked at him from the side, blinking restlessly. Her eyes were still not focused on anything. For her, keeping a secret from Tatsuya was probably impossible.

If Tatsuya had looked at her for 10 more seconds, Miyuki probably would have given in and shared her worries. However fate is whimsical, and this time, it was on her side. ——One could see it as bad luck that she was deprived of her chance to alleviate her concerns.

Miyuki stood up panicking when the sound of the video phone rang out. Even though there was a wireless console under the table, Miyuki jumped with vigor and went towards the panel on the wall.

Miyuki raised a voice of surprise when she saw the displayed name of the one calling.

"Onii-sama, it's a call from Oba-sama!"

"Put her on."

As he answered, Tatsuya had already moved in front of the screen's camera.

Miyuki pressed the answer button of the panel.

On the video phone's screen, Maya's face appeared.

"Good evening, Tatsuya-san. I was worried you may have been in the middle of something."

Although it wasn't easy to understand what she meant since they were facing each other, Maya's gaze was turned towards the table where the coffee cups were.

"No, it's alright. Oba-ue, what business brings you here today?"

For someone like Tatsuya, such an answer lacked composure. However, Maya did not comment on it.

"Last Saturday, Gu Jie managed to run away. Since we understood how, I thought I would let you know."

Hearing this, Tatsuya thought "Is this something that the Head of the Yotsuba Family should say?". However, this thought was premature.

"It seems like our communications have been intercepted."

"…Strong codes are supposed to protect the communications between members of the Yotsuba Family."

"We use a code changing every hour like the national defense but apparently this measure has been defeated."

As Maya said, the encryption key used by the members of the Yotsuba changed every hour.

That was why Tatsuya went to the Magic Association every month to meet an envoy who would hand over codes for the following 60 days (The extra amount being there as a reserve). Even the encoding machine that Ayako gave to Balance contained 43,200 codes, and to prevent an eventual theft of the codes from the machine, security of the highest order had been included.

To think that all of those security measures have been for naught was hard to believe.

"Then, should I think of this very call as one that might be intercepted as well?"

However, no matter how hard a thing it was to believe, Tatsuya didn't really have any reason to doubt it, thus, he accepted it as the truth.

"Indeed. That is why the next time we find a clue, we will transmit it to you by letter."

"Understood."

Even if she said that she would send a letter, there was no way she'd entrust it to the regular mail services, thought Tatsuya.

And one more thing. Since she contacted them tonight, it means that a new clue had been found today, Tatsuya understood that she planned on transmitting this information tomorrow.

"That is all I wanted to say about this matter… Oh that's right, Tatsuya-san. Did things go well with Juumonji-dono and the Saegusa Family's daughter? The Ichijou Family's son also joined from what I heard."

"If you're talking about the meeting, everything went well."

What is this about suddenly, thought Tatsuya, but he answered without giving much of a thought.

"Is that so? Please do your best. However, getting along too well is a no-go."

Tatsuya looked at Maya with a quizzical expression.

Was his expression that strange? A smile appeared on Maya's face.

"My, my, didn't you notice? It wasn't Juumonji-dono who made the Saegusa Family's daughter participate, but the Saegusa Family itself. Using the meetings as a pretext to make you and her have something like a date."

What are you saying in front of Miyuki. A vivid panic awoke in his heart, however, it wasn't shown on his face.

"So they had such an intention. I will be careful."

Showing his displeasure with a frown, he returned such an answer.

"Yes, do so. Then I bid you farewell. I wish you a good night as well, Miyuki-san."

"Thank you very much."

"Have a good night, Oba-sama."

The call ended. In front of the now pitch-black screen, Tatsuya turned towards Miyuki.

As he expected, Miyuki was pretty angry.

However, it didn't show on her face.

A strong malaise invaded Tatsuya. And yet, he felt like he knew the cause.

Tatsuya didn't feel any joy at being envied. He never wanted Miyuki to sulk or blame him, not even once. At the same time, he never thought of Miyuki being jealous as a bother or troublesome, either.

Tatsuya thought that there was no reason for Miyuki to restrain herself in any way. However, this could also be seen as his younger sister growing up, or even a proof of her growth; that was one way of looking at it.

There were also people who say that a woman's envy represents the depths of her love.

Still, one cannot say that envy is a virtue. While his intuition told him that this change in Miyuki was undesirable, his common sense judged that it might be a suitable change for a lady.

You can be open about your jealousy like before, was something that Tatsuya couldn't tell her.

◊ ◊ ◊

The next day, February 12th, it had started to snow.

Due to the thick clouds that were covering the sky, it was still dark outside despite the fact that it should have been sunrise soon.

Coming down from Yakumo's temple, Tatsuya was running down the street at a speed nearing 60 kilometers per hour.

With his speed and the current weather, it was pretty difficult to identify the people he was passing by. Even so, anybody would've been able to recognize that woman, especially Tatsuya.

She had quite a peculiar appearance.

To be precise, Tatsuya couldn't have recognized her face. Her casquette (cap) that dropped to her eyes, large sunglasses, and muffler that covered her face all kept her face hidden.

Even though he was running on a downhill slope, Tatsuya managed to stop two steps in front of her.

"Good morning, Yoshimi-san."

Yoshimi made a quick bow in response to Tatsuya's greeting.

She took a portrait envelope out of her coat and presented it to Tatsuya.

Maya's messenger was Yoshimi.

"I have accepted it."

Tatsuya said so after receiving the letter, and upon hearing this, Yoshimi's face moved up and down ever so slightly. Tatsuya wasn't even sure if she was actually looking at him behind her sunglasses.

Failing to perceive her expression, Tatsuya looked at Yoshimi's face once more. And, he felt that it was really unnatural. Trying to hide her face in plain view, if he had been the one observing, no doubt he'd have thought her to be suspicious.

Since it was roughly in the middle of winter, it wasn't that strange to have a muffler up to her nose.

The casquette might also be acceptable in the world of fashion,

The combination of those two wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

No doubt, the problem came from——

"Yoshimi-san, I think that this appearance has the opposite effect, it makes you stand out quite a bit. Shouldn't you remove the sunglasses?"

Despite knowing that it was uninvited interference, Tatsuya offered some advice.

Twice, Yoshimi shook her head left and right.

After coming back home and taking a shower, Tatsuya decided to open the letter he received from Yoshimi before having lunch.

"…Onii-sama, the preparations for the meal are complete."

Miyuki came from the dining hall to call Tatsuya. She immediately realized what the letter he had in his hand was about.

"Is this what Oba-sama talked about yesterday…?"

"Indeed."

Tatsuya nodded while standing up, he then handed the letter he had just finished reading to Miyuki.

Miyuki took the letter with a bit of hesitation, and opened her eyes wide as she read what it contained. The look on her face was filled with surprise.

This letter suggested that there was a possibility that Gu Jie's escape was made possible due to the cooperation of soldiers of the Defense Forces.

"It seems like no organization is unrelated to shady things. The Defense Forces are no exception. Though, I'd like to think that only a part of it is rotten."

Tatsuya took the letter from Miyuki's hands and put it back into the envelope he held.

"That being said, we shouldn't dwell on our past mistakes, especially when our target is willing to harm us to gets what they want. We have no reason to show restraint."

"Onii-sama…"

Miyuki looked up at Tatsuya's face with an anxious expression.

Tatsuya smiled while lightly patting his sister's head then headed towards the dining room.

◊ ◊ ◊

Class 2-A's lesson at 1 o'clock was practice. Today's subject was ‘The definition of Magic's ending conditions'.

There was no Magic that lasted forever. There was a limit to the effective time of every Magic. But at the same time, with Magic that didn't have clear time limits, there was no way to precisely understand how long the effects would last.

It is impossible for a Magic Sequence to interfere with another. Unless we're talking about unusual Magic like Spell Dismantling (Gram Demolition) and Spell Dissolution (Gram Dispersion), interrupting the casting of a spell is impossible. Only overwriting the phenomenon alteration with more power is possible.

Thus, for a Magic to overwrite another, an interference strength greater than that of the Magic you want to overwrite is required. That stays true even if your objective was to "return an event modified by Magic to its original state". In the case of a Magic with uncertain ending conditions, the load on the Magician would increase even further. That is why the definition of ending conditions for Magic is an extremely important factor in a Magician's ability evaluation.

Generally, there were two ways of defining such a thing. One was to include the magic's effective time (start to finish) directly into the Magic Sequence. This method had been put to great use in Taurus Silver's flying devices.

Another was to define the conditions of the Magic's success. Until the objective of event modification is achieved, the activation continues. Hence, it is a method to put an end to the effectiveness of the Magic Sequence itself. This method tends to be used a lot in practice.

Today's class was about practicing Magic spells with variable durations of effectiveness. The training method used was for a student to change the color of a plastic ball from white to red, then to green, then to blue, and 10 sets of 3 color changes were to be performed in 30 seconds. Although the time and frequency could vary, the average of 1 second per color remained.

If the change was done too late, then the time limit would be exceeded. On the other hand, if it was executed too soon, the interference strength required to overwrite the previous Magic Sequence would increase. If this mistake was to be repeated multiple times then performing the Magic would progressively become harder, putting a lot of stress on the student.

Today was merely a practice session, not an evaluation, so the students had to group up and alternate in using Magic. The one not performing the Magician's role had to perform the role of a timekeeper. In other words, while one of them executed Magic, the other kept track of the various timing aspects that this practice required; the timekeeper had to focus on the numerical stopwatch on his terminal, or at least that was how the previous training session went.

The problem was that the number of students from Class-A during the previous session was odd. The option of forming groups of three people was abandoned and in the end, a single person had to practice on their own. As luck would have it, that person had been Miyuki.

Actually, everyone in the class had wanted to raise their hands and pair up with Miyuki. The problem was that everyone else had already picked their partner, and now wanted to switch. It wasn't like nobody wanted to group up with her.

Since yesterday had been the day of lessons and experiments, such a problem hadn't popped up. Much like last week, the situation today shouldn't have happened. ——If it hadn't been for the fact that Masaki had just ‘moved in'.

"Shiba-san, would you pair up with me?"

After Masaki had been told the goal of this practice session by the teacher, he had gone towards Miyuki. He proposed pairing up to the lone student.

Noise flittered across the practice room. Words of regret and some curses escaped the lips of various boys in the classroom. It was limited to a mere "Damn, too late!".

"Yes, with pleasure. I look forward to working with you, Ichijou-san."

Even Miyuki might have found it unpleasant to practice alone. Hearing Masaki's request, she nodded with a radiant smile.

When Masaki heard the explanation for the exercise, he muttered "Isn't that easy?".

These days, the second year students of Third High were practicing the use of Magic on a target behind a wall. That being said, the real purpose of this was to be able to cast Magic on an invisible opponent, or one taking cover behind an object.

Compared to the combat application oriented practices of Third High, Masaki couldn't help but think of First High's practices as a way of competing in cleverness.

And after watching Miyuki performing the task, this impression only strengthened. Miyuki perfectly changed the color of the ball in 10 sets within the allotted time of 30 seconds. What Masaki felt admiration for was the more bright and vivid colors of the ball than her perfect timing. This plainly showed the level of her interference strength.

"30 seconds exactly. As expected of Shiba-san."

"Thank you very much. Ichijou-san, you can start whenever you want."

With social etiquette in mind, Masaki had praised Miyuki's talent, and being urged on by such a lovely girl afterwards, he was now brimming with enthusiasm.

All unneeded feelings disappeared in an instant, and Masaki was now focused on his target like in a real combat situation.

"How about the count? Do you want the notice set at 10 seconds?"

Hearing Miyuki's proposition, Masaki was about to say "There's no need", but reconsidered.

"…Alright then, please set the countdown for the last 10 seconds."

Thinking that just for him, Miyuki would do the countdown had its charm for Masaki.

"Understood."

It seemed like his cheeks were about to loosen when he heard Miyuki's crystalline voice.

"I entrust the signal to you."

Masaki once more focused on his Magic. His mindset had already switched to a war-like state.

"In that case, 3… 2… 1… Start!"

While Masaki was setting the time-based ending conditions in his head, he executed his Magic in succession.

Red - - Green - - Blue.

Red - - Green - - Blue.

The lively colors he created were in no way inferior to Miyuki's.

Masaki felt satisfaction at the fact his Magical power wasn't losing to Miyuki's.

Red - - Green - - Blue.

Red - - Green - - - Blue.

Maybe caused by his idle thinking, his rhythm started to fall apart.

To correct his mistake, he tried to adjust the timings.

Red - Green - - Blue.

According to his own time perception, the discrepancy had been dealt with.

Red - - Green - Blue.

Now, however, the problem lied in the fact that due to his adjustments, he was too far ahead.

Red - - - Green - - - Blue.

Masaki waited more than 1 second in order to slow down his sets.

Red - - Green - - Blue.

He then managed to get back to the regular interval. He decided to make the final adjustments during the countdown.

"10… 9… 8…"

Miyuki's countdown started.

His error margin was less than a second's time.

Masaki opted for correcting the error on the final sequence.

"3… 2…"

Red - Green,

"1…"

Blue.

The plastic ball went back to its original white color.

"It's over."

Slightly late, Miyuki reported the end of the time limit.

"Remaining: 0 - 7 seconds. It's very hard to imagine that this is your first time Ichijou-san."

Miyuki turned a smiling face towards Masaki.

Masaki hid the cramp that was forming on his face and returned a smile.

The passing line for this exercise was for the last color change to be within a single second of the timer's end. The reason he managed to clear the exercise was thanks to the countdown. When thinking that Miyuki managed to perfectly time hers without Masaki's assistance, he really couldn't feel pleased at all.

"Just 30 seconds. Not bad, Honoka."

"Eh-he-he, this is my area of predilection after all."

Hearing the nearby voice, Masaki received an even stronger shock.

Using the remaining time for the session, Masaki finally managed to achieve the clearing conditions on his own.

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After the morning classes ended.

"Ichijou-san."

Masaki had finally managed to recover from the shock he had received from having to actually put effort in the practice session from before. He was called by a girl from the side.

Masaki turned his face towards the voice. He was like any other Magician and possessed a good memory. He could remember Honoka's name almost without any lag.

"Umm, Mitsui-san was it?"

The fact that he remembered her name was not due to her previously introducing herself nor hearing her name from someone else. He remembered her as the victor of this year's Nine Schools Competition in the Mirage Bat category.

"Yes, my name is Mitsui Honoka."

Honoka nodded with a pleased face. She didn't have any interest in Masaki, but knowing each other's names would make their interactions smoother. Honoka had smiled in relief.

Masaki interpreted her smile as pure courtesy as well.

"Ichijou-san, would you like to go to the dining room together?"

"Huh, with me?"

That was why, such an invitation took him by surprise.

"Yes, with us."

Honoka looked over her shoulders.

There stood Shizuku and Miyuki.

When she met Masaki's gaze, Shizuku nodded without changing her expression. No, well, maybe it had been a bow? Shizuku's reaction had been that ambiguous.

As for Miyuki, she was displaying a smile that hid what she was really thinking. But at the very least, to Masaki, this smile didn't give off the impression that he'd be a bother.

"…Is it alright for me to go with you?"

Instinctively using the polite tone again, Masaki replied so.

Realizing that his eyes were turned towards her, although her smile still looked slightly bitter, Miyuki's expression softened.

The smile that gave off a faking sentiment turned into a warm smile.

"Yes, certainly."

To Miyuki's answer,

"It would be my pleasure!"

Masaki stood up with vigor.

"Huh?"

This first person who saw Miyuki's group, who was slightly late for lunch, had been Erika.

Yesterday she had thought 'He will try to stick to Miyuki for sure' and was surprised when Masaki kept his distance. But now she was suspicious that Masaki was acting exactly like she originally predicted.

She wasn't the only one. Leo and Mikihiko were also looking at Masaki with intrigued eyes.

"Umm, Onii-sama… Is it alright if Ichijou-san shares a seat with us?"

"Of course."

However, Tatsuya' answered as if it had been obvious. An immediate response.

Rather, Masaki was the one who was puzzled right now.

Masaki, who was standing there dumbfounded, was spoken to by Tatsuya in a direct —— that is to say, not in a particularly friendly way —— tone.

"Ichijou, do you know how to place an order? The purchase system of the cafeteria should be something rather standard."

"Ah, yeah. No problem."

"Let's go, Ichijou-san."

Being urged on by Miyuki, he went towards the ordering machine with her. Honoka and Shizuku followed just behind him.

Having retrieved her meal, Miyuki sat down next to Tatsuya.

Masaki sat down right in front of her.

Honoka was next to Masaki, right in front of Tatsuya.

Erika, who had been sitting in front of Tatsuya, gave her seat to Honoka and moved next to Miyuki.

Erika, who had purposefully taken a roundabout path around the table, suddenly spoke to Masaki.

"Ichijou-kun, how's the investigation going?"

Masaki almost choked on his freshly acquired bowl of soup. Since he had seen Erika a few times already, he wasn't surprised at her overly familiar attitude. What had surprised him was the fact that she asked him such a question about a duty verging on a grey line with the law, in a place where anyone could be listening.

"Erika, Ichijou has just arrived in Tokyo. No matter how outstandingly superior a Magician he is, there is no way he'd accomplish something like that in a day."

While Masaki was struggling to find a way to answer, surprisingly for him, he was rescued by Tatsuya.

"I guess that's true."

"Indeed, Erika. This is not something you should ask in such a pressing manner. Ichijou-san, sorry about that."

Lightly reproving Erika, Miyuki bowed towards Masaki.

"No, well, this isn't something that needs an apology or anything."

Miyuki directed an innocent smile towards Masaki who was getting flustered. Masaki's pure-hearted reaction might have been something refreshing for her.

"That being said, I envy you, Ichijou-san."

"Ah? Umm, what about?"

With Miyuki's dazzling smile turned towards him, Masaki was getting more and more restless.

"For you to be called a ‘outstandingly superior Magician' by Onii-sama. Onii-sama is unexpectedly nice to you."

Miyuki sent a look of reproach to Masaki while smiling. No, to be more precise, it was more like envy?

Of course it was just a joke; however, what little calm Masaki had managed to preserve was blown away in an instant, he couldn't think of anything. His concerns about Miyuki calling Tatsuya "Onii-sama" as well flew out of his mind.

Tatsuya opened his mouth. "That's not the case" he said. Maybe it had been to turn Miyuki's gaze away from Masaki, maybe it had been a straight manner of scolding her for teasing him, but anyway, it was obvious that Tatsuya had again come to his rescue.

"So after all, Tatsuya-san recognizes Ichijou-san's ability."

However, as if covering for her, Honoka interrupted his sentence.

"That's nice. It feels like some sort of rivalry between two men."

"You might say rival, but in terms of Magical Power, it's pretty clear that Ichijou comes out on top."

Being so directly talked to, Tatsuya had no choice but to turn his attention away from Miyuki. Without wasting time, Tatsuya turned his attention to the person in front of him.

"However, isn't what we're practicing currently Tatsuya's field of expertise?"

"Well, that is because the current theme requires precision more than speed and strength."

Without humbling himself, Tatsuya honestly replied to Honoka.

"Tatsuya-san managed from the very beginning to perfectly time every color change for 1 second."

Mizuki seemed to be completely relaxed, and she opened her mouth as if she had been the one praised.

"Really!? Tatsuya-san, that's incredible!"

Hearing Honoka and Mizuki's speeches damaged Masaki quite clearly. Miyuki, who was seated right in front of him couldn't overlook this, and gave him some comforting words.

"Even though I always stay within the time limit, I still end up being slightly too fast or too slow."

However, Honoka who sitting next to him and was even closer, hadn't noticed.

"Tatsuya-san, isn't there some kind of trick for this?"

Being overjoyed at Miyuki showing sympathy for Masaki, she couldn't help but try to draw Tatsuya's attention.

From Honoka's point of view, everything was going according to the plan.

It had been Honoka who proposed to invite Masaki to their table. She had planned on pushing Masaki towards Miyuki while using this chance to get closer to Tatsuya herself.

Saying this is wicked would be pitiful.

"All's fair in love and war" was a popular phrase that originated from a tragicomedy of Great Britain from the 17th century. That being said, in modern times, there were strategies that were established as forbidden by a multinational treaty, so you couldn't say that this phrase was true for everything.

It remained true for the matters of love, and you couldn't say that everything was allowed. For instance, using a lie like ‘I am bearing your child' to force your lover to give you money in order to part with you, those kinds of things were usually restricted by your sense of morals.

Still, what Honoka did was not exactly foul play; all things considered, this was pretty common for a girl in love. Using her friend's partner that way might be considered in bad taste, but it only served as evidence of Honoka's strong love.

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After leaving Miyuki at school and going back home, Tatsuya mounted his favorite motorbike and headed towards Tsuchiura. Needless to say, his destination was the National Defense Base of the 101st Brigade. It was the headquarters of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

Tatsuya was sporting a rough appearance on his bike, wearing trousers that looked like they were made out of leather, topped off with a large and imposing jacket. But the only thing that mattered at the gate was your ID, and from Tatsuya removing his helmet, he was granted access to the base.

Parking his motorbike in front of headquarters, he looked at the third floor of the building. His grave look was due to the negotiations —— neither a report nor a consultation —— that would come.

Still, it wasn't possible to ignore it. The fact that the Ten Master Clans had taken an official stance regarding the terrorism perpetrated by Gu Jie at Hakone had mainly been in order to attenuate the anti-Magician hate.

However, after hearing about Gu Jie's activities in Kamakura, it was decided that Tatsuya would have to bring them down as soon as possible. It hadn't been an order from Maya, but something he proposed of his own volition.

Gu Jie's method of using Magicians as literal tools for his goals went against Tatsuya's ambition of giving Magicians a way to live without being instruments of war.

These were irreconcilable differences. In the future that Tatsuya envisioned, Gu Jie's existence was something that could not be allowed.

Gu Jie had to be killed. In order to achieve that, he would have to get rid of the victims he used as tools…

Lightly shaking his head to settle down, Tatsuya entered the building and asked that his arrival be relayed. In reality, he didn't even want to

phone beforehand, but he couldn't just suddenly intrude without at least doing that much.

There was still 5 minutes before the designated time, but Tatsuya proceeded through. Was this place shorthanded as usual? He hardly met anyone on his way to the commander's room.

"Special Lieutenant Ooguro."

He raised his voice towards the room after knocking on the door. It wasn't like his voice could directly pass through the door, but it was equipped with a microphone that automatically picked up voices. It was something visitors were unaware of.

"Enter."

Actually, the voice originated from the speaker system embedded inside the door. The technology had advanced to the point that the speaker wasn't visible to the user.

After he heard the sound confirming that the lock had been removed, Tatsuya opened the door.

Kazama was sitting at the desk in front of him, it seemed that today he was alone. A touch-screen terminal was on his desk, he was most likely looking over a proposal or a report until Tatsuya arrived. His responsibilities appear to have increased with his promotion.

Tatsuya stepped in front of his desk and saluted.

Although Kazama stood up to return the salute, he immediately sat down again. Tatsuya, who wasn't invited to take a seat, stayed still.

"Special Lieutenant, at ease. So, what suddenly brings you here today?"

That wasn't to say that Kazama was irritated. Even his voice had remained calm.

"Since our communication could have been intercepted, I thought that I would come and report to you directly."

"Oh… Are you saying my battalion's encryption code could have been cracked?"

"Affirmative. Actually, I was warned that there was a high probability that the communication codes of the Yotsuba Family have been deciphered already."

Tatsuya revealed one of his cards immediately.

Kazama's eyebrow twitched lightly.

"…Still, I think that the codes we are using should be stronger than the Yotsuba Family's."

"I am of the same opinion. But still, I thought that this was enough of a reason to be careful."

Although Tatsuya didn't mention exactly on what grounds he had thought that there was a need to be cautious, Kazama didn't object.

"…Alright. Special Lieutenant, state your business."

"There is a possibility that the special forces training grounds of the Zama base have been corrupted by foreign elements."

The Special Forces Training Grounds —— This place had received this name due to fact that it gathered numerous Magic users who had seen their Magic Power strengthened after training there, and received the name ‘Special Tactical Soldiers'. Despite its name, it wasn't so much a training center as a place where experiments were conducted on living humans. The Defense Forces were keeping those reinforced Magicians in a few of the well-known facilities.

Just this information alone would cause a large scandal for the Ministry of Defense if it was leaked, but the Zama base had another secret. Within its walls, joint research was being conducted with the USNA.

Even though it was something unbeknownst to the rest of the world, it remained true that they were providing Japanese citizens for some foreigners to experiment on.

This was a dark side of the government that could never be made public, and a shameful heritage of the pre-war days.

Tatsuya was reporting that this kind of facility, which was constantly under extreme surveillance, had been partially taken over by foreign powers.

"…Did something happen?"

Kazama didn't ask "What?" nor "Is that true?". Neither did he ask "On what grounds can you say that?".

Kazama was trying to figure out what could have happened to make Tatsuya come to this conclusion.

"Last Saturday at dawn, during the pursuit of the mastermind behind the Hakone terrorist acts, Gu Jie, there had been interference from Magicians specializing in ‘Combustion'. Without a doubt, these Magicians were supposed to be on standby at the Zama base."

The special forces training grounds of the Zama base were especially useful in times of war, with psychics strengthened for ‘Ignition' or ‘Explosion'. The three people that Tatsuya killed last Saturday at Kamakura, after an investigation by Yoshimi, turned out to be Magicians who had been changed into ‘Generators' at the special training grounds of the Zama base.

"Are you saying that the terrorists' hand has extended as far as the Zama base?"

"Affirmative."

Kazama folded his arms and leaked a groan, a frown on his face. It had already been quite a scandal that Zhou Gongjin had concealed himself in the Uji Second Supply Base, but for geographical reasons, anything pertaining to the Zama base was immediately an even more serious matter.

It was right under the nose of the capital, Tokyo. A facility made in order to hide the truth about experiments on living beings. A

comfortable cage where combatants comparable to heavy weapons were confined.

The simple fact that one of those bodies which had been experimented on managed to slip out of the base was a big problem in and of itself. If it became known that such beings had become the underlings of an anti-Japanese operative, then it probably wouldn't just end with the National Defense taking responsibility.

"Who is aware of this?"

Kazama closed his eyes and asked Tatsuya so.

"So far, only the members of the Yotsuba Family."

In other words, this information hadn't leaked to the Ten Master Clans. Hearing this, Kazama's expression seemingly softened. Still, he had kept his posture with his arms folded, and his frown remained.

"Does Special Lieutenant intend on attacking the Zama base?"

"Negative, Lieutenant Colonel."

Tatsuya's tone had changed subtly.

"Even though Zhou Gongjin had been given shelter in the Uji Second Supply Base, I don't think Gu Jie would do something similar in Zama's base."

"Gu Jie… Is that the name of the mastermind?"

Hearing a name that rang a bell in his head, Kazama looked up at Tatsuya, unfolding his arms.

"However, didn't you just say that the experimented bodies of the Zama base had become the pawns of this Gu Jie?"

"There is no mistake in that fact. However, while it is true that reinforced Magicians from the special training grounds have been turned into ‘Generators', assuming that Gu Jie himself is present there and responsible for this would be presumptuous."

"So you think that someone in the Zama base cooperated with Gu Jie and took the reinforced Magicians out of the base?"

"Affirmative."

"Hmm… Compared to thinking that an unidentified foreigner infiltrated the base, this is certainly more realistic. However, how exactly did he do that?"

"A staff member from the special forces training ground might have been turned into a puppet. There might be a Magician capable of an operation as complex as performing the remodeling needed to create a ‘Generator', along with depriving someone of his free-will."

Kazama put both of his elbows on the desk and joined his hands while silently thinking.

"…Are the identities of the people turned into Generators known?"

"Here."

Tatsuya took out an unsealed envelope and presented it to Kazama. He retrieved 3 folded sheets of paper from it. These were photographs of the 3 people that had been turned into Generators, and their bodily features were recorded as well.

"If we shared that information with the base of Zama, we could probably get our hands on the puppets in a few days. However, would it be possible for this investigation to be left to me?"

Kazama matched Tatsuya's gaze, still sitting. He was looking at him with such intensity that it probably wouldn't have been exaggerating to call it a glare.

Tatsuya then revealed his second card.

"Speaking bluntly, I know where Gu Jie's hideout is. However, that place is next to Zama's base."

"…Are you worried about involving Zama's base and having this turn into an all-out battle?"

To Kazama's low, yet heavy voice, Tatsuya returned an answer immediately.

"That is a possibility. Especially since the members of Special Forces Training Grounds of Zama's base hold a strong enmity towards the Ten Master Clans, if someone who was sent there to investigate agitated them too much, it could be dangerous."

Kazama couldn't deny Tatsuya's prediction possibly happening. This was a facility made with the goal of not letting its residents escape. Various adjustments had been made in order to not let even the bodies that had gone through the strengthening experiment have a chance of leaving. With that in mind, escape was basically nothing but a dream. Still, it was a fact that, every year, the Ten Master Clans helped in dealing with cases of escapees.

It might sound inhumane, but for the Defense Forces, disposing of them was a much safer way. If the experimented subject survived, it would take a great deal of effort to keep the whole thing a secret. On the other hand, a dead body would leave no tangible evidence behind it. Taking the power and influence of the government into account, burying such a mundane affair in the dark would be no trouble. At the very least, compared to the cost of keeping one alive, it was far cheaper.

If headquarters learned that an unauthorized fight broke out near Zama that involved a member of the Ten Master Clans, and the Yotsuba Family… They could make experiments escape on purpose to put the responsibility of disposal on the Yotsuba Family. This was a scenario that was likely to happen.

"Concerning the non-intervention promise made to the Zama base, we will need the cooperation of the General."

"We wouldn't have the time for this. Gu Jie would be able to escape."

"…Special Lieutenant, do you want to settle things once and for all?"

"I'm planning to avoid as many fights as possible with National Defense personnel. However, if a fight broke out by accident or due to unavoidable circumstances, I will erase every single trace of it."

Tatsuya was saying that if need be, he'd use his ‘Mist Dispersion' even on allied troops.

"It might be impossible to do otherwise."

With a bitter expression on his face, yet deprived of hesitation, Kazama permitted the use of Tatsuya's Mist Dispersion.

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It was 8 P.M. when Tatsuya finally arrived near the Zama base, having traveled from the Tsuchiura base after taking his time to settle various affairs.

He didn't talk to Katsuto and Mayumi about his coming here today. Of course, not even to Masaki. He missed today's meeting as well. Rather, members of the Yotsuba Family were his companions.

It seemed like all the members were already gathered. Tatsuya stopped his motorcycle in the public park's parking lot and stepped up to a van.

"Fumiya, Ayako, you did well in coming despite today being a weekday."

Once he was in whispering distance he called out to his second cousins in a low voice, they had been erasing their presence just like he was.

"Tatsuya-niisan!"

While keeping his voice down as well, although unable to completely hide his astonishment, Fumiya responded.

"I didn't even feel your presence. You keep getting better and better at being invisible."

"Good evening, Tatsuya-san. I understand that the current situation demands it, but since this is bad for my heart, could you be more considerate?"

Fumiya let out undisguised praise while Ayako reproached him. Her attitude had changed a little ever since his engagement with Miyuki had been announced.

She was less reserved, and it looked like the distance between them had shortened.

However, this was Ayako trying her best to accept the reality of the current situation.

"It looked like Yoshimi-san would faint due to the shock."

Near Ayako, Yoshimi shook her head from left to right in her usual mysterious style.

"Yoshimi-san, you don't need to hold back. Tatsuya-san, despite being so straightforward, utterly lacks any form of common sense; in this situation it wouldn't do any good to hide the truth."

Those words may have been surprisingly abusive, but Yoshimi wasn't one to have reserved thoughts. She was more the type to let her guard down.

"I'm alright. I won't be shaken by something like this."

"Eh…? But you looked pretty surprised from what I saw."

"It's not the case. I'm an adult after all."

Yoshimi had become quite talkative with Ayako as well. Her wariness might also have loosened since they were cousins. For Ayako and Fumiya, Tatsuya was their elder second cousin, from their father's side of the family.

Yoshimi, on the other hand is the daughter of the brother of Ayako's mother. In other words, their maternal cousin.

Yoshimi's full name was Shinonome Yoshimi. Although she was currently 21 years old, she wasn't going to school. Even during her high school years, she had followed a correspondence system. Thus, she could perform investigative duties while learning.

With this in mind, it would make sense if she had developed a sort of elder sister role towards Ayako, but looking at them, it was pretty clear that it was Ayako who would grasp the initiative. It wasn't due to her status as the daughter of the current Kuroba Family Head, but rather just their personalities.

"Tatsuya-niisan, are you going to change your clothes inside?"

Fumiya asked Tatsuya while ignoring the girls and their playful attitudes. Combat equipment for the upcoming operation had been prepared in the van.

By the way, Fumiya's appearance was, as usual, his cross-dressing disguise. Although, had he finally decided to be more attractive with his make-up thicker than before.

"Alright."

Without talking about Fumiya's pretty girl style, he got in the vehicle.

The combat suit that the Yotsuba had prepared more or less looked like the clothes Tatsuya had been wearing just a few moments ago. The only difference would be that the blouson insides were tied up. However, as far as performance was concerned, it rivaled that of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion's Mobile Suit.

Today, Tatsuya wasn't using the gun-shaped Silver Horn but the thought-controlled type set with a Silver Taurus bracelet. Hidden inside his blouson wasn't another CAD but a gun and a knife. If they were found by the police, it wouldn't end with just an inquiry. This was also one of the reasons why they had changed their clothes here and not elsewhere.

The helmet Tatsuya was wearing could also function as a gas mask. Fumiya was looking at his brave figure admiringly while he himself was wearing a mini-dress full of button ornaments —— that being said, all of those buttons were gas capsules and flashbangs —— when he called out to Ayako.

"We're going soon."

Fumiya, who was already looking at Tatsuya, nodded immediately.

Ayako and Yoshimi, who had somehow gone into a ‘Whose appearance is not suitable for this mission' debate, turned towards Tatsuya and slightly bowed.

Tatsuya, then, began to walk.

Directly behind him were Fumiya and Ayako, as well as several men in black suits.

The number of shadows around Yoshimi suddenly increased, and then she saw the three of them off.

"Still, the surveillance is pretty tight."

Using something that resembled binoculars —— a sensor that made infrared rays as well as electromagnetic waves visible —— she reported so to Tatsuya in a concerned voice.

The three of them were observing the target building from inside the invisibility field that Ayako produced. Yoshimi had read this ‘Memory' of Gu Jie's new hideout from the corpse of a former Generator. Although it was nothing but a private hospital on paper, in truth, this place undertook illegal requests from the army as an unofficial research facility. The intense policing they saw was to be expected.

"It wouldn't be too difficult to sneak into the building, but with this kind of heavy surveillance, I don't think they'll only have guards. There might be some other things waiting for us."

"So you think that there is some sort of trap set up?"

"Yes."

Tatsuya assessed the situation with his own eyes.

Considering that we're talking about an organization that was used to take on military missions, they were sure to be prepared.

The hospital's owner might have already had his heart remodeled. He may even have been killed already. Anyone would've been able to guess as much, was what Tatsuya was thinking.

Based on this, he searched both the interior and exterior of the building.

The security equipment was certainly overbearing, but it wasn't anything out of the extraordinary for a private operation. Compared to the several sensors installed throughout the Steeplechase event in the Nine Schools Competition, this was nothing.

He could see nine human shadows inside of the building.

Five of those people had a normal human's information structure. They were probably doctors and nurses on duty.

One person had noise in the information structure of his head. He was probably the director of the hospital who had been made into a puppet.

Two people had a distorted information structure type that Tatsuya had seen before. Without a doubt, those two were Generators.

And a single person with a strange information structure was there. Although he seemed more similar to a regular human than a Generator, his age data was definitely weird.

Even if a person had changed their body's age to be different than their actual age, only their true age would be shown. The body's age would be shown alongside their general health.

However, in the information body that Tatsuya was looking at now, there existed two different datasets for his age.

(Such an information body, I have seen one similar before… When, and where was it?)

Tatsuya sifted through the vast amount of data in his head, quickly finding what he was looking for.

(I see, this was Zhou Gongjin's…)

Due to the fact that Tatsuya had been solely concentrating on localizing his true location that was camouflaged by Ghost walker, the abnormality in Zhou's information structure had gone unnoticed at that time. However, with Tatsuya never forgetting a single detail, a sense of discomfort appeared.

"Found him. This is probably Gu Jie in person."

Tatsuya reported to Ayako and Fumiya with a whisper.

Tension ran through the muscles of their back.

"Let's move in immediately."

Fumiya replied with a whispering voice, too. It looked like Ayako didn't have an objection, either.

The three people walked towards the front gate. Due to the magic of the men in black suits, regular humans couldn't see them. Although they had received orders to avoid a fight to the best of their ability, if there was any possibility of the National Defense getting involved, those orders would be ignored.

"Tatsuya-san."

Nodding at Ayako's voice, Tatsuya pressed the button on the radio he had in his hand.

The light that was illuminating the hospital's gate disappeared. The men in black had cut the electrical wire that was supplying the building with energy. The wire in the ground as well; since there was no need to dig it up due to Magic, it had been a simple task.

To begin with, despite being a private hospital, it was still a proper hospital. It was quite probable that the building had an emergency power supply.

Tatsuya confirmed that the security system had been cut off and signaled Ayako with his hands.

Using Ayako's ‘Mock Teleportation', the three of them jumped on the roof of the hospital.

The light had yet to be restored.

"Let's proceed as planned."

The plan was simple, Ayako was to secure their retreat while Fumiya acted as her guard.

Tatsuya was to secure Gu Jie's capture on his own.

Even though both Ayako and Fumiya had strongly opposed this plan, they weren't so childish as to pose difficulties when the strategy had already been set in motion.

"Please be careful."

The brother and sister, who looked like a pair of pretty sisters at present, sent him off in unison.

The lights came back on at almost the exact moment Tatsuya entered the building from the rooftop.

Looking at him, not even a trace of panic was present. This timing was roughly what he had expected, so it wasn't as if it had been "in the nick of time".

However, he wasn't being carefree at all. Did their target guess that this kind of operation was taking place due to the power outage? The information body that Tatsuya thought was Gu Jie immediately headed for the emergency stairway from his former position in a room on the 3rd floor.

This movement was convenient for Tatsuya. The risk of involving doctors or nurses became smaller with it.

Tatsuya dashed towards the emergency exit, but stopped in his tracks once he reached the last room in the hallway.

Bullets came flying out of the door and crashed into the wall on the other side.

Tatsuya switched his ‘View' from the emergency stairs and focused it on the weapon of his ambusher.

He used ‘Decomposition' on the gun.

The Magic Sequence for ‘Ignition' was nullified and rendered useless by his Gram Dispersion.

The gun of another Generator who was approaching from the back was decomposed.

A door was vigorously flung open, and Magicians turned into Generators jumped out to attack him.

They were not only wielding strengthened magical skills from being prime field agents turned into Generators in the National Defense's facilities, they were also making use of power and speed impossible for humans to achieve. One of the Generators tried to stab Tatsuya with a knife.

However, not only was Tatsuya a product of the Fourth Research Institute, he was also a Magician heavily trained in hand-to-hand combat. The training he had received had been more oriented towards physical strength rather than magic. As someone who primarily learned to use his body, he was completely familiar with the process of controlling his body with Psions.

Though he hadn't received biochemical enhancements to make his body stronger, Tatsuya made up for this disadvantage by protecting the information structure of his muscles so that even if the burden on his bones exceeded the limits, his body wouldn't suffer damage.

The Generator used the ‘Body Ignition' Magic on Tatsuya. Not needing a CAD, that might have been the proof that he had psychic ancestors.

Tatsuya once again used his Gram Dispersion towards the Magic Sequence aimed at him. At the same time, the Generator's blade was parried with his own knife that he took out of his blouson.

The blade lock lasted an instant.

After Tatsuya parried the attack, his power slipped out, but at the same time, the Generator leaped back.

Tatsuya had wanted to destroy his opponent's posture, but it ended up only lasting for a moment.

On the other hand, he had gained a distance where knives wouldn't be able to reach.

Tatsuya turned his back on his opponent.

He then threw his knife towards another Generator who was approaching from the back.

Perhaps due to this surprising action, the opponent stopped and had to parry the knife throw with his own knife.

His eyes let go of Tatsuya for an instant.

When he turned his attention back to him, Tatsuya had pulled out his gun.

He turned his gun towards the Generator.

Due to the attached suppressor, a small gunshot sound leaked.

The Generator who had expected a magic attack ate a bullet straight from the front.

The high caliber bullet hit him right in the stomach, and the Generator, who had roughly the same physique as Tatsuya, was pushed back. No bleeding could be seen on the Generator who was now on the ground. That was evidence that he was wearing an effective body armor.

Tatsuya turned around once more.

The other Generator had aimed for his neck with the knife in his right hand, and Tatsuya caught it at the wrist with his left hand.

His Magic Calculation Area dissolved the Magic Sequences of ‘Ignition' and ‘Scorching' that the Generator was about to unleash.

That Generator's casting speed was nearing instantaneous levels as a psychic. By sacrificing diversity, his event modification speed had been so drastically enhanced that he could provoke it just by wishing. This came with being a Generator. By getting rid of their free will, it was possible to free up mental activity resources.

However, even with this, Tatsuya's ‘Decomposition' was faster. Even faster than the Generator could complete his magic, Tatsuya's decomposition came out first.

Tatsuya twisted the Generator's right hand and broke his wrist. He then shot him from up-close with his gun.

Even though he didn't have the capacity to feel pain, his faltering physical condition made magic execution nigh-impossible.

Even though the first Generator who had been knocked out had already recovered, his magic execution speed still wasn't back to its normal level.

Suppressing all the Magic Sequences of his opponents, reserve power arose in Tatsuya's Magic Calculation Area with which he counterattacked.

Tatsuya used ‘Partial Dismantling'.

In that instant, holes opened up in the chests of the Generators.

Although the Generators continued to weakly struggle without their hearts, they were in their death throes, and soon, even that stopped.

After confirming that all Psion activity had stopped, Tatsuya headed towards the emergency stairway once more.

Gu Jie had apparently already reached the 1st floor.

Tatsuya jumped down the stairway.

Avoiding damage with minimal inertia control magic, he aimed at the ambulance that Gu Jie had planned on using to escape.

Why was there an ambulance despite no emergency being signaled? Why was there a need for an ambulance to be bulletproof and heat-resistant? Any such questions were shelved in the depth of Tatsuya's mind.

The Psion noise provoked by the Cast Jamming emanating from the ambulance wasn't a problem for him either.

The only thing that was left as an obstacle from Tatsuya were several High Power Rifle bullets shot in succession towards him.

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On that day, a large-scale VTOL (Vertical Take-Off and Landing) aircraft from the USNA came flying to the Zama base. Considering that the Zama base was a shared territory between Japan and the USNA, this was not unusual. The existence of the Special Forces Training Grounds was a secret that was known to the USNA for historical reasons. There was no reason to refuse the landing and no possibility of that to begin with.

After the aircraft landed, the commander of the base accepted a report from the commanding officer of the transport. This wasn't unusual either. In the case of the commander, if there were specific reasons to this visit, it could save some trouble.

The commander of the USNA Army introduced himself as major Benjamin Lowes. The impression that the base's commander had of him was that of a high-class officer, fearless yet smart. Not only because of their current alliance, but also because he had the type of personality which made him not behave in an unnecessarily rude way.

Still, the base's commander didn't relax. He understood with a glance that it was a high-caliber Magician who had just entered the room.

Since this was a base where Magicians were strengthened, there were precise magic power measurement devices. And although he had skillfully influenced the measurement results, on the contrary, it had only served to prove the height of his skill.

After the formal diplomatic exchanges, Major Lowes started to discuss an incredible matter with a refined tone.

"It is shameful to say, but I have been sent here in order to capture deserters."

"Deserters, you say?"

The commander of the base barely managed to swallow his "Again?". He was one of the few officers who was aware that last year's troubles with vampires had been caused by USNA deserters. This, too, was due to the special circumstances of the Special Force Training Grounds of Zama's base.

"As you might know, on December of the year before last, soldiers of our army had deserted and fled to your country. Although we confirmed that most of them died, it appears that it wasn't all of them."

Major Lowes —— Commander of the Stars' First Unit, Benjamin Canopus, seeing through the commander's doubts, came up with a lie. Since the commander wasn't aware of absolutely all the details, he couldn't doubt these words.

"We're not sure what exactly their objectives are but we have confirmed that the deserters plan on kidnapping the doctor who has been providing medical treatment to the Magicians of this base. The attack will take place tonight."

"…Major, you have our gratitude for this information."

"Commander, I think you have an idea of what I'm about to ask of you."

We will deal with this attack ourselves, was what the commander was about to say. Considering that this was about to take place right in front of their noses and that it concerned civilians who were cooperating with them, it was no wonder.

However, Canopus anticipated this reaction and prevented this sentence from coming out.

"I heard that the Ten Master Clans are also pursuing the deserters of our army. We think that stimulating the Magicians currently stationed in this base would be unfavorable for both of our countries."

The commander made a sour face and swallowed the sentence he was about to say.

"Could you, at your discretion, overlook my unit's action in this matter?"

"…This exceeds the range of discretion I am allowed as an officer. Approbation from headquarters is needed."

"Commander. It's an urgent matter. The deserter's attack could happen in a matter of hours. If you say that it is impossible for you to entrust this entirely to us, we could agree to a joint operation with your own forces."

Canopus played his cards right here and now.

"Indeed, if you could lend us soldiers of the Special Force Training Grounds… Number 024, 026, 029, 037 and 041 would be suitable for such a task."

Those were the numbers of the strengthened Magicians that had been stolen by Gu Jie.

"…I agree to this cooperation. However, I'll have you leave the reporting duty to me!"

Towards the speech of the commander, Canopus returned a salute with a nonchalant face.

This event had taken place 3 hours before Tatsuya had rushed into action.

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Even though Tatsuya instinctively protected his vital points, he couldn't dodge entirely. The first bullet hit his left arm, the second incoming bullet was decomposed while he rolled on the ground. The wound he received on his left shoulder was already healed by his ‘Regrowth' by the time he hit the ground.

The sniper who intervened just before Tatsuya could catch Gu Jie came from the sky. No, with such power, a better way of putting it would be that he fell from the sky.

Neither the shadow of a plane nor a helicopter could be seen. It was as if he had been shot from a human cannon to this place.

(Why is the USNA military here!?)

Tatsuya couldn't help but be surprised after reading that person's information with Elemental Sight.

Again, Zama was a joint Japan-USNA joint base. That a USNA soldier was present there was not that mysterious.

However, why would such a person help Gu Jie's escape?

Despite holding such thoughts and hesitations, as a combat magician, half of his mind had automatically reacted to disempower the appearing threat.

The High Power Rifle the opponent was wielding was instantly turned into separate parts as well as the body armor he was wearing.

If that person had been a National Defense soldier, Tatsuya would've erased him.

However, since Tatsuya hadn't thought about the USNA military possibly being involved, he had yet to decide an appropriate way of dealing with them.

(Erasing him would be —— bad.)

Tatsuya concluded so after disarming the soldier. He was currently in the middle of an illegal operation. Giving the USNA a pretext to accuse Japan of abducting their soldiers would be troublesome.

Tatsuya shot at the soldier who was standing there, petrified, as he had yet to understand how exactly he had been disarmed. Once that was done, Tatsuya used his ‘Regrowth' to restore his body armor and rifle to their original state. This whole process had the sole purpose of making out which magic was used against the target next to impossible to discern.

Then, once again, he went after Gu Jie. The ambulance that Gu Jie had boarded had already driven off.

Tatsuya expanded his ‘View' to search for Gu Jie's location.

However, he was unable to. The ‘Eyes' of Tatsuya were focused on something whose priority was higher, something that he couldn't ignore.

Fumiya and Ayako were fighting hard.

He ran in the building at full speed.

Fumiya's reaction to the soldiers who landed on the rooftop was immediate.

The Magic that allowed one to inflict damage to the mind and the soul, ‘Direct Pain', deprived the soldiers' hands of their strength and made them drop their weapons. Still, one couldn't say that his reaction to the grenades that had been thrown from their back had been enough.

Ayako immediately erected a physical barrier, one that would correctly interact with the fragments released by the explosion. However, the grenades that had been shot were not exploding ones, but smoke grenades.

The rapidly expanding smoke made it even harder to see than it already was.

Fumiya was able to unleash magic without relying on his eyes, but he was still a long way from reaching Tatsuya's level.

Fumiya's ‘Direct Pain' was a magic that targeted the mind and the soul. He apparently thought that not being able to maintain visual contact wouldn't affect the magic's effect too much.

However, it was in fact the opposite. The ‘Spirit' doesn't exist in this world. Even if one were to search for them, he wouldn't know where to look. Therefore, to aim this Magic, a link from this world to the spirit world was needed. Suddenly, a screeching like the scratching of glass came from the smokescreen towards Ayako and Fumiya.

"Cast Jamming?"

"No, not exactly. But, this is…?"

Ayako was the one to answer Fumiya's doubt. Still, there was no trace of relief on her face at knowing that this wasn't Cast Jamming. She anxiously searched for the noise's source.

Fumiya, on the other hand, concluded that as long as this wasn't the noise of Psion obstructing magic execution, finding out its source could be postponed. At the moment, their priority was to push back this mysterious enemy.

With the CAD on his right hand, he had planned on using an Activation Sequence to blow away the smoke screen with an air flow. However… His CAD wasn't functioning properly. His Activation Sequence was filled with "noise".

The CAD he had tried to use was a Generalized portable terminal-type CAD, and he was as used to this one as the knuckle duster Specialized CAD he used before. Someone of Fumiya's level couldn't make such a mistake.

Piercing through the smoke screen. High Power bullets struck against the barrier one after the other.

"Yami-chan, increase the amount of Psions injected into your CAD!"

While shouting this to Fumiya, Ayako maintained the barrier by pouring an excessive amount of Psions into her own CAD.

Fumiya operated his CAD once again. As per Ayako's advice, he used twice as much as Psions.

The strength of the signal that returned from a CAD was roughly proportional to the amount of Psions injected in the Activation Sequence. Despite the fact that noise was still mixed in the signal, Fumiya managed to filter it by himself and forcibly executed the magic he wanted to use previously.

The smoke screen cleared up.

The number of enemies had increased to five people. Three were equipped with High Power Rifles, the two that had suffered Fumiya's attack still had trembling arms but were now pointing towards Ayako and Fumiya some sort of flashlight whose muzzle looked like a trumpet.

Fumiya and Ayako instinctively understood that this cylindrical tool was the reason for their misbehaving CADs.

This was the breakthrough in terms of casting obstruction devices that only the USNA had developed, ‘Cast Jammer'. Although neither of these two knew about it, their deduction was spot-on.

"Nee-san, leave this place immediately."

Fumiya ordered Ayako so.

"I'll report so you come back and get me later!"

"——Understood!"

For a moment, Ayako wanted to object but after thinking about it once more, she nodded to his words. She was aware of the fact that she wasn't cut out for direct confrontation.

However, she was a beat too late. Fumiya turned away from the enemies at the front. He jumped, not caring about his long skirt, and threw a kick.

The soldier who tried to attack Ayako was thrown back in the air.

"Yami-chan, are you injured!?"

However, Fumiya didn't come out completely uninjured either. His tights were cut up, blood was trickling down from his foot. The soldier who received the kick had apparently slashed him with his knife.

The material that made up Fumiya's clothes wasn't normal, either. It wasn't on Tatsuya's combat suit's level but it was still a high-level protective suit. The knife that the USNA soldier used didn't seem to be normal metal.

"I'm alright!"

Fumiya landed on his other foot and calmed down Ayako. However, simply judging from the fact that he didn't land on the injured leg, the damage must've been pretty severe. Considering that reinforcements were constantly coming from the air, he didn't even have the composure to treat his wound.

Ayako ripped off one of her buttons and threw it behind Fumiya.

An intense flash occurred, the movement of the soldier who was about to attack Fumiya was instantly stopped.

With Fumiya's magic, the soldier fainted.

In the meantime, bullets had constantly been fired at the two.

Ayako had been unable to leave the place. In order to protect Fumiya from the barrage of bullets from High Powered Rifles, she had to maintain her barrier.

If there hadn't been obstruction from the Cast Jammer, she could have easily used the interval between gunshots to escape with Mock Teleportation. Fumiya, too was badly affected by this, and normally he'd have been able to silence all of them at once. But right now, he had no choice but to use ‘Direct Pain' on a single target at a time. Neither of these two had the composure to wonder about the strangeness of their enemies.

The enemy purposely only replaced the knocked out members with soldiers.

If more numbers were sent at once, the battle would turn into an even bigger uphill struggle.

Neither Ayako nor Fumiya had noticed this.

Fumiya, in particular, had his hands full with holding his own against reinforced soldiers.

Ayako couldn't escape, either, because she had to maintain her barrier to be protected from High Power Rifles. First of all, they had to find a way to deal with those.

Just when Fumiya was about to take desperate measures and try his luck, the situation changed drastically. Two gunshots resounded.

The noise that was disturbing the CAD's functioning suddenly vanished.

"Tatsuya-san!"

Ayako instinctively called out his name.

Near the rooftop's entrance, Tatsuya stood with his face hid by a helmet. He was pointing his gun at the soldiers who had been operating the Cast Jammer.

One of the reasons Tatsuya didn't just jump on the rooftop was that he wanted to avoid making himself an easy target for snipers, but that wasn't all. He wanted to scatter sleeping gas on the 1st and 2nd floor too. It was now necessary to abandon the idea of preventing a ruckus but he at least needed to find a way to prevent innocent doctors and nurses from being involved.

The extra time it took for him to scatter the gas capsules in each floor's corridors made his arrival late, so much so that saying that he was "in the nick of time" wouldn't be an exaggeration. At the very least, he had arrived in time to prevent Fumiya's reckless final charge.

Along with the gunshots, the Cast Jammer effect was interrupted.

The gunshots had been nothing but a decoy, in truth, and Tatsuya had used Decomposition on the devices.

The High Power Rifles were turned towards Tatsuya.

Tatsuya did not Decompose them.

The high power bullets were propelled out of their muzzle. Reading their trajectory, he held up his hand.

It was a trick that he had already shown during the 2095 Thesis Competition, but still, it's effect was undeniable.

The soldier, who mistook this for Tatsuya grabbing with his bare hand the bullets, was petrified.

Tatsuya did not overlook this chance.

With his Decomposition, tiny holes were made in their body armor. The soldiers who had been operating Cast Jammer and the five others rolled on the floor, bleeding from the holes in their stomach.

On the other side of the rooftop, Fumiya mowed down the rest of the opposition with ‘Direct Pain'.

"You two, are you inju…"

Beginning to say so, Tatsuya frowned behind the helmet's visor.

He extended his left hand towards Fumiya's injured foot. The knife wound disappeared in an instant. The cut up tights were also repaired in the process.

After confirming that this was the extent of their injuries, Tatsuya shot the five bodies in the holes created by his earlier Decomposition.

"Umm, what exactly are you…"

With a pale face, Ayako asked the reason for Tatsuya's cruel deed.

"I want them to think they have been knocked down by a gunshot. Though they'll probably understand just by looking…"

With what looked like a wry smile, Tatsuya used his knife to stab the enemies Fumiya had defeated.

"They won't die. If their injuries are treated quickly, then they'll be saved."

From the inside of his helmet, an excuse that would do nothing to assuage their conscience came out. This wasn't an excuse to justify his act, but an excuse to get Fumiya and Ayako's consent.

"…Are we going to leave them like that?"

Fumiya wasn't condemning Tatsuya. He was just wondering if they should leave the enemy here.

"These are USNA soldiers. Kidnapping them is probably a bad idea, and moreover, they probably have no clue about Gu Jie anyway."

"Understood."

Despite answering so, Fumiya wasn't entirely convinced. They intervened in his mission despite being soldiers of the USNA, and for him, that meant that they had to have some clue about the whole affair.

However, he could understand why capturing USNA soldiers would be a foolish action.

"Well then, let's retrieve the enemies that have been knocked down in the hospital."

"Two Generator corpses are lying down in the 3rd floor's corridor. I'll show you the way."

Nodding to Tatsuya's proposal, the three of them returned in the building.

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"Major Canopus. The obstruction force has been annihilated."

"Wait until the Yotsuba members withdraw to retrieve them."

"Understood, sir."

At that time, in the USNA aircraft that had landed in the base of Zama, such a conversation was taking place.

"Did the car that Heigu boarded manage to escape safely?"

"No pursuing vehicle detected."

"Good. Keep an eye on it with the satellite."

"Yes, sir."

Canopus was currently a step ahead of the Yotsuba regarding the pursuit of Jiedo Heigu. It was all thanks to their intelligence agency. As part of the precautionary measures regarding foreign Magicians, the Psion wave pattern of Gu Jie had been analyzed when he was in their country.

That, coupled with short distance radars that could recognize specific Psion wave patterns, was a technique that Japan didn't have yet. It was as if the USNA Army had already captured Gu Jie.

However, Canopus wouldn't move in to restrain Gu Jie's course of action. He was diligently following the instructions he was given by Colonel Balance.

How to guide Gu Jie to the high seas while obstructing the movements of Japan's pursuit units? Canopus thought about this for a long time.

Chapter 9

Ever since the US military had interfered in the tracking of Gu Jie the day before yesterday, there had been no progress in the operation. The events of that night gave Tatsuya a great sense of futility. If there was one saving grace, it was that the National Defense Forces didn't start fighting his comrades. Tatsuya was so disheartened that he plunged into a state in which he had no motivation to participate in the mission anymore.

The issue of USNA troops helping Gu Jie escape had already been reported to Kazama by Maya. She, too, requested for Kazama to look into the situation. However, even though a full day had passed, nothing had been found.

Katsuto, Mayumi and Masaki were the same. Even in the meeting held by Katsuto, nothing noteworthy was brought up. After Tatsuya, omitting specifics, gave his report, other than witness reports in Zama, nothing came up.

Masaki had considered skipping school and devoting all of his time to the mission, especially since he had already changed residences in order to focus on the search. Though, if he were to do that, it would cause his father and Third High's Principal Maeda to lose face, hence his frustration.

Since losing focus in the middle of an experiment could cause injury, he held his anxiety in, and kept his cool during the lesson. But sitting at the computer terminal, he found himself unable to concentrate. Realizing his current state, he stood up to grab a bite to eat.

The day before yesterday, Masaki had been invited by Honoka to sit at the table with Miyuki. To him, it was an unexpectedly fun time. As though Miyuki had anticipated it, she didn't show signs of being intimate with Tatsuya. Instead she had spent more time talking to Masaki, seemingly worried.

But today, he didn't want to show his defeated face to the girl he liked.

Thinking so, as soon as lessons ended, he stood up and left for the canteen alone.

"Ichijou-kun."

But before he could leave the classroom, a girl's voice rang out behind him. The two girls standing there were neither Honoka nor Miyuki.

"Please accept this!"

Faster than Masaki could reply, a small box with a ribbon was pushed to the front of his chest.

Reflexively accepting it, before he even had the opportunity to ask "What is this?", the girls ran off with shrill voices.

"Ah, they ran off!"

"Then, me too!"

Taking advantage of Masaki's shocked state, other classmates started swarming around him. To be exact, five of them. Like the girls before, they presented neatly wrapped boxes before exiting the classroom.

"Ichijou-san, you sure are famous."

Masaki heard laughter, and turned around.

There stood three people. Honoka was in front with Shizuku and Miyuki behind her.

Miyuki smiled while looking at the boxes Masaki was carrying.

Masaki felt anxious —— although that feeling was unjustified.

"What is this…?"

Still in a confused state, Masaki directed a shocked face towards Shizuku. His expression was unusually easy to read.

"Today is Valentine's Day."

Masaki went rigid. Slowly, he looked down at his hands. There were seven boxes in his hands. Even if he tried to conceal them, he couldn't.

Although hiding them now would have no meaning, Masaki hadn't realized the date, and was upset.

"At this rate, it's likely to increase."

With a casual word, Miyuki severely beat down Masaki.

He placed the boxes in a carrier bag he received from one of his new male classmates —— even though he hadn't asked for one and nobody said a word about it —— and placed it beside his desk. Though his original intention was to eat alone, he followed Honoka to the cafeteria.

At this point, Masaki finally noticed the atmosphere in the school. As the anti-magician sentiments had cast a shadow over the students' hearts, compared to previous years, it was lacking in liveliness. Even then, it was certain that there was a sense of anxiety and anticipation.

"Ah, they're here, they're here."

Recognizing Masaki, Erika smirked.

"Erika, stop that."

"What? It's fine. There's no need for Miki to be jealous of him."

Though Mikihiko tried to stop Erika with a bitter face, she ignored him completely.

Putting an untouched meal on the table at the seat beside Masaki, Erika quickly asked.

"Ichijou-kun, how many chocolates did you get?"

It would be nice if I could at least put the food in my mouth, thought Masaki. This was because he was in the midst of blowing on his food and was about to eat (his food was hot).

"Chiba-san, what are you saying all of a sudden…"

"Today, when I say chocolates, I'm obviously referring to Valentine's chocolate right?"

As Erika's rebuttal was truly only describing her question, Masaki was unable to reply.

"So, how many? I bet on more than single digits."

"Bet?"

"Oops~"

With Masaki staring at her in shock, Erika hurriedly covered her mouth.

Looking at her happy eyes, it was clear that she felt no guilt whatsoever.

"Such a bet actually happened…? Erika, who are you betting with?"

There was no undertone of finding fault with Erika's words in Tatsuya's question.

"I can't say."

"I'm no longer a member of the Public Morals Committee, you know?"

"Isn't the head of the Public Morals Committee here?"

With Erika pointing towards him, Mikihiko, with his left elbow on the table, rubbed his brow and let out a large sigh.

"Tatsuya, Erika…, that is within the jurisdiction of an Autonomous Committee Member."

"Is that so? But still it's a secret."

Erika said as she stuck out her tongue, and once again turned to face Masaki.

"Then, how many were there?"

"The amount doesn't matter…"

Masaki's tone was considerably brusque. Probably because he came to understand there was no need to hold back towards Erika.

Anyhow, Masaki had no intention to continue discussing the topic. Even if Miyuki thought nothing about it —— for Masaki to receive chocolates

—— the discomfort of him remembering his past fickleness was enough.

"Seven."

"It was seven."

But Masaki's hopes of keeping it secret were instantly dashed.

Honoka and Shizuku both spoke out the number at the same time.

"Eh, seven huh… It's still high noon. By the time you return home, it will, without a doubt, reach double digits."

Though Masaki wanted to switch the topic as soon as possible, it wasn't just Erika who was really getting into the topic.

"Seven? You only just transferred schools; that's quite impressive."

Leo nodded in an exaggerated manner. He didn't look like he had any ill intent but even if there was no ill intent, he couldn't laugh without causing offense.

"It's not a transfer. Speaking about it, Saijou, how many did you receive?"

"Me? Zero."

Having said that, Masaki wasn't really vexed with Valentine's Day. He wasn't that petty. Thus, towards Leo's unexpected answer, Masaki struggled awkwardly over a reply.

"Still, you sure are composed, huh, Leo."

"That's because I have club activities." (I'm guessing he's implying he'll get some at his club?)

Seeing Tatsuya and Leo converse in such a manner, Masaki felt relieved.

"What are you being so proud about? Anyhow, they're obligatory chocolates."

"Says the lonely girl who has no one to pass obligatory chocolates to."

"Unfortunately, it's not that I don't have such people, but that I don't have the intention to do so."

"Even if you say that, the end result is still the same."

"Aren't you the one being too hopeful on receiving anything?" (referring to club activities)

…With Leo and Erika arguing, Masaki became flustered yet again.

"Both of you, stop it…"

A tired Mikihiko interjected. At that time, Masaki shared the same equivocal sentiments.

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After lessons were over, Tatsuya headed towards the school entrance. The hunt for Gu Jie was still on, so he was still in the Student Council.

Although it was a "search", Tatsuya himself had not done much information gathering. Rather, Tatsuya's job was handling the clues that they had been (illegally) provided via the Perception magic users' analysis results and their cooperative relationship with the intelligence agency, starting with Yoshimi. If they had no information about Gu Jie's whereabouts, all they could do was wait.

Since the day the American Military had interfered, they had not been able to obtain any valuable clues. They were well-aware that as time passed, it would become more difficult to capture the target, but rushing around and trying to gather information unsuccessfully had only worn everyone out. There was absolutely no point in any of it. Had today not been Valentine's Day, he would have been on his way to the Student Council for the first time in a while.

Tatsuya's gait was a little heavier than normal as he made his way to the school gate, and when he heard running footsteps behind him he stopped.

"Tatsuya-san!"

Honoka had called out to him at almost the exact same moment that Tatsuya turned around to look at her.

Standing behind Honoka was Shizuku. Tatsuya was relieved to see that Honoka had someone with her. Maybe it was mean to Honoka, but he didn't feel like being alone with her today.

"If it's not too much trouble, can I have a moment of your time?"

Honoka sounded a little nervous, but she had an unwavering determination in her eyes.

"Should we go somewhere else?"

Tatsuya in response, rather than nodding his head.

"Err, no, that's fine, right here is okay."

Honoka, then, from an antique bag —— a type called a "school bag" from 100 years ago —— produced a flat box that had been wrapped up neatly.

"Please take this!"

They were standing on the single road leading from the school building to the front gate. Tatsuya and the other two weren't the only students passing by. Now, a few of the other passing students had slowed down to see what was going on as they walked past.

It was not that Honoka had been so nervous that she didn't notice the circumstances. Rather it was the opposite. She had displayed her determination in front of all the other students watching them.

"Thanks."

Tatsuya had not refused Honoka.

"But are you sure about this though? You know I'm engaged to Miyuki."

Tatsuya's response might have been even more cruel than a rejection.

"It's fine."

But Honoka was not discouraged in the slightest.

"I know how it is. That aside, I would be very happy if you would accept these."

"…I see. Then, I will take them."

Having been spoken to in such a manner, even Tatsuya had nothing more to say.

"See you tomorrow."

"Wait a sec."

Shizuku had called out to Tatsuya, who still had Honoka's box of chocolates in his hand as he was turning to leave.

"Use this,"

said Shizuku as she handed a stylish bag to Tatsuya. It was a black-and-white patterned imitation leather bag, shaped similarly to a tote bag, but with an airtight fastener on the opening that made it completely waterproof.

Tatsuya hadn't brought his bag with him today so he had no place to put the chocolates away, so he was very grateful for Shizuku's offer.

"Sorry. I'll be sure to give it back."

As Tatsuya took Shizuku's bag, his brow furrowed slightly because the bag was a little heavier than he expected it to be.

When he went to put the wrapped chocolates in the already-opened bag, he realized there was yet another box already inside the bag.

"It's for you."

Tatsuya raised his head at the sound of that perfectly-timed voice.

"It's just a little present, nothing special."

Shizuku with a mischievous smile.

"Oh, and don't worry about returning the bag."

She immediately turned around to hide her blushing face.

A thin smile spread across Tatsuya's face.

The tension between him and Honoka had been eased by this lighthearted atmosphere.

If it had ended there, it would have been a picture-perfect image of youth.

"Okay, me, too!"

But due to a surprise interloper, the curtain could not be drawn on that scene.

"Eimi?"

Ignoring Honoka's irritated tone as she called out her name, Eimi ran right up to Tatsuya.

"Here's a present from me, too!"

The item he was happily handed was a tiny box that fit perfectly in the palm of his hand.

"A, ah…"

Since Tatsuya had taken Shizuku's "present", he had no excuse for not accepting this one too.

"Eimi, what about Tomitsuka-kun!?"

Honoka demanded an answer from Eimi.

"I was gonna go give it to him after this!"

Eimi showed not even the slightest hint of timidness or embarrassment.

"You looked like you were about to head home, Shiba-kun. I figured that today was the only day I could give you a present like this."

Tatsuya was totally indifferent to this.

"Then, I shall as well."

Subaru stepped out from the shadows of the nearby trees as she said this. What she handed Tatsuya was not a box but rather a small parcel.

"Ah, I think you already understand, but this is just a present."

"Of course I understand."

With a forced smile, Tatsuya accepted the parcel.

Honoka looked like she just didn't even feel like protesting at this point.

Tatsuya thought that it was surely over now, but…

"Shiba-senpai!"

This time it was a first-year student that called out to him. It was the new girl that had been paired with Minami during the girl's Shield Down event of the Nine Schools Competition. She was accompanied by her fellow classmates, and Tatsuya's bag, which he received from Shizuku, was now so full of chocolates that it could not possibly hold anything more.

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After his meeting with Katsuto and the others, Tatsuya headed back home once again, and when he arrived, he was greeted by Miyuki sitting with both hands on her knees in the entranceway of the house.

"Welcome home, Onii-sama."

"Miyuki… What's going on?"

Miyuki was sitting, wearing a long one-piece dress with a frilled apron on top of it in a manner that looked not unlike the way a Japanese wife would wait for her husband to arrive home. ——Tatsuya felt there was no mistaking that she was sitting that way to block his path.

"Is there something wrong?"

"No… nothing's wrong."

Miyuki did not move, so Tatsuya was left standing in the shoe-changing area of the entranceway.

"By the way Onii-sama, it seems like you've brought some luggage home with you? If you don't mind, I'll put it away for you."

"As you can see, I have no luggage. …Why are you doing that?"

Miyuki lowered her eyes and hid from Tatsuya's gaze.

"Well… when you came home from school, it looked like you had luggage with you and I was simply asking."

Having heard her explanation, Tatsuya finally realized the source of Miyuki's irritation.

"I didn't get anything from Saegusa-senpai. She just loves to play pranks."

The word Tatsuya had said, "pranks" called to mind Mayumi's prank from last year —— those extremely bitter chocolates —— but he didn't want to derail the conversation.

"She is the eldest daughter of the Saegusa Family so she doesn't understand how her actions affect others."

In response to Tatsuya's flatly-spoken statement, Miyuki took a small breath.

"You've never given Ichijou a gift on Valentine's Day, right Miyuki?"

Miyuki had never given her classmates or upperclassmen gifts on Valentine's day. She didn't like all the fuss involved. But that wasn't the reason why she didn't give any gift chocolates to Masaki. The real

reason was that she knew that if she gave Masaki chocolates as a gift today, she couldn't just pass it off as a "gift." Tatsuya's words called that to mind and Miyuki understood what Tatsuya was trying to say.

"When Honoka gave me chocolates I clearly reminded her that we are engaged. She still wanted to, so I didn't say no."

Miyuki suddenly raised her head, looking wide-eyed and confused.

"That's…! Onii-sama, that's a little…"

"Pitiful, right?"

Miyuki looked down again. It was the same position she was in before, but now the atmosphere was different. Her cute, pouty mood was gone now. A heavily strained atmosphere now formed between Miyuki and Tatsuya.

"I know you might feel that I'm pitiful right now. Thinking about Honoka, maybe it would have been better to clearly refuse, but…"

Miyuki stood up without raising her face.

"Onii-sama, you haven't eaten yet, right? I will go and prepare something now, so please wait in the dining room."

Ignoring Tatsuya's self-reflection, Miyuki turned her back to him.

Tatsuya had told them that he would have dinner when he got home, so neither Miyuki nor Minami had had eaten dinner yet. It was a regular pattern for these past few days.

The three of them sat together around the dining table, but the mood was awkward and dinner ended on a somewhat sour note.

"Thanks, it was delicious."

"She should have refrigerated it first," thought Tatsuya as they all stood up from the table. He collected his dishes and started to head for the kitchen.

"Sorry, Onii-sama. Can we sit together for just a little while longer?"

Miyuki stopped him with those words.

With a nod, Tatsuya returned to his seat.

Miyuki and Minami exchanged a look, then Minami began to quickly clear the table.

Miyuki produced a large dish covered in a silver cake dome from the refrigerator and brought it to the table.

"To be honest, I don't know whether it was right or not for you to accept Honoka's chocolates."

Miyuki was staring at Tatsuya intently.

"I don't understand it, so I'm not going to think about it anymore. You may think of me as a cruel girl for this, but I have many other things to worry about."

Miyuki inhaled sharply. It wasn't for what she was about to say next, it was to calm herself down.

"If you are going to concern yourself with Honoka, Onii-sama, I ask that you do it in moderation. I really don't want to have to do something unnecessary."

With that, Miyuki lifted the cake dome. A powerful bitter scent wafted over the table, teasing Tatsuya's nose.

It was a simple bitter chocolate whole cake with no fruits or cream on it. But despite its simplicity, the surface of the cylindrical cake was so perfectly smooth and shiny that there was no way it was made by an amateur.

"Since I went to all the trouble of making it, I was hoping you would try it Onii-sama. Will you accept this Valentine's chocolate from me?"

Minami placed a plate with a knife and fork on it in front of Tatsuya.

Tatsuya was a little hesitant to take a piece, but he took the knife and made a cut in the cake.

He cut out a 1/6th piece for himself and then placed his fork on his own plate.

"You know, I was actually looking forward to this, too,"

said Tatsuya as he returned Miyuki's gaze with a smile.

"I'll go make some coffee!"

Miyuki stood up daintily and went to the kitchen.

Having turned her back to Tatsuya to face the hand-mill coffee maker, Miyuki's cheeks were bright red, and her lips trembling uncontrollably.

Chapter 10

For the Magicians dealing with the depressing mood from the aftermath of the terrorism, yesterday's Valentine's Day was a long-awaited day for the Magic High School and Magic University students to safely show their feelings.

However, the time they could be intoxicated in such an atmosphere, was only a day.

Friday, February 15th 2097 A.D. What all Magicians, high school students, university students, civilians at large and people related to magic feared, finally come to a head.

No… perhaps it should be said that it had come to start.

At 11 A.M. in the morning, in front of the Magic University main gates. The demonstration by the anti-magician organization, included plans to break through the university gates with brute force and engage the police there.

As a bank for vast amounts of intelligence pertaining to national defense, entry into the Magic University was already tightly controlled for unrelated personnel. The police stopping the forced entry by demonstrators was not them siding with the magicians but a matter of national policy.

However, the people holding negative sentiments against the Magicians failed to understand this. Or, rather, they did understand but purposely chose to misinterpret the situation. Some of the demonstrators made use of their strength, falling to violence.

Initially, they were knocking against the policemen in groups. Upon being pushed back by the police officers, they intentionally fell down, construing themselves as victims of abuse of authority. Subsequently, what followed was only to be expected.

"Ahh… Those guys, so they've finally started."

Looking at the news displayed on the large screen in the canteen, Leo said this helplessly.

"They're too much, honestly…"

It's unclear if it was accidental or planned but after pulling out those over-excited protesters waving the demonstration cards around, even the other protesters started throwing stones at the police officers-Mikihiko frowned upon seeing this. (The road leading up to the Magic University gates didn't actually have stones, the stones were picked up by demonstrators from the weed-proofing sheet by the tree, then thrown)

The broadcast cut to a live feed of the thugs among the demonstrators being pulled aside.

"…The number of people arrested so far is 24. Is that number large? Or small?"

This question was raised by Masaki, who had joined Tatsuya's lunch group, since he did not know the situation in the capital.

"Compared to the number from the anti-war protest before, the number is small, but compared to recent events it can be considered on the larger side."

Tatsuya answered Masaki's question.

"However, Tatsuya. It looks like the number of people throwing stones compared to before has doubled."

Without thinking, Honoka interjected. She has, these few days, been very enthusiastic.

"If they wanted to arrest everyone present there, the police would need many more officers there."

"Even if they can't arrest them on the spot immediately, the cameras on the streets would have captured them. Hence there's no need to be anxious, arrests can be made after the fact as well."

Having relatives who were police officers, as well as having lots of fellow disciples affiliated with the police, Erika followed up on Tatsuya's comment.

"Eh? Erika, that, is that your brother?"

Zealously watching the news, Leo queried Erika while staring at the screen.

However when everyone's eyes turned to the screen, the feed had already cut to the reporter.

"Those should be counted as civil law crimes too… Plus it's a case related to magicians, I'm afraid he was probably called here to deal with the thugs."

Actually having discovered Toshikazu even earlier than Leo, Erika replied indifferently.

Although not really out of consideration for the brother and sister's poor relationship, Mikihiko changed the subject.

"Exactly how many people here participated in the protest?"

"Neither the police nor the media has released the numbers…"

As Mizuki said, the government not releasing the number of protestors was already something to be expected for a long time. As for the media, they could have analyzed the pictures taken from above in the air to roughly approximate numbers but perhaps out of consideration for the police, they did not do a report on the total numbers. As for the organizers' published numbers, nobody would believe them.

"From the pictures on television, it's probably about 200 people, plus minus."

"So in total, about 300, 400… It might be more than 500 people."

In reply to Tatsuya's estimates, Masaki inferred the scale of the protests before sighing.

"People have the freedom to think for themselves, but despite that, for the side being viewed as enemies, it's really disheartening to see this."

"I feel the same."

Responding to Masaki's complaints, Miyuki concurred.

In the next second, Erika angrily shouted "What!?".

On the television feed, lawyers were criticizing the actions of the police in making the arrests.

"What's with 'This is encroaching on the freedom of speech'! 'Freedoms of assembly and association must be respected as well'!? That's a failed attempt at illegal entry and obstruction of performing of public service!"

"Although I agree with what Erika said… the number of people giving the same excuses as those lawyers is probably substantial."

Nobody refuted Mikihiko's ominous prediction.

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"Inagaki-kun, are you alright?"

Toshikazu asked with an expression that did not show much concern,

"I'm fine."

Inagaki replied with a dishonest attitude.

In actuality, the news broadcasted yesterday at noon had been purposely cut and edited to become that video.

In the video feed, police officers were suppressing the thugs who were using the demonstration cards as weapons. However, in the midst of that, in order to prevent onlookers from entering the driveway, the police had set up a human wall but were instead beaten up by some thug wielding a blunt instrument.

Perhaps they were trying to rescue their companions who were arrested.

That thug was caught by one of the alert plainclothes police officers mixed in with the crowd of onlookers, it just so happened to be Inagaki.

Because Inagaki had used magic while capturing the thug, the man was still in a state where he could not be questioned.

Hence, his ties to the group of protestors was still unclear till now. Although it couldn't be concluded that they were definitely connected.

The assailant with the hidden weapon could have been related to the anti-magic protests, but no one reported as such, yet it could also be seen as not letting the thugs be seen as connected to the protests by viewers. Such intentions were obvious.

The police officer who was almost assaulted sustained no injuries because of Inagaki. Inagaki, who protected him, however, though luckily not suffering any fractures, had pretty serious bruises left on his hands. Most importantly, however, injuries of this degree were very common in the Chiba dojo.

Moreover, Inagaki was also one who was able to become the next head's left and right hand man through his ability. He was only forced to receive the blow with his hands in order to protect the police officer as well as the onlookers around from being hit by the blunt weapon, yet he was able to cleverly dodge in a such a way as to prevent heavy injuries.

From Toshikazu's perspective, there was some obvious swelling in another spot.

"Eh? Inagaki-kun, was your head hit too?"

Toshikazu, surprised, asked Inagaki who was holding his forehead while frowning. The parts hit by the thug should have only been the wrists. For someone with Inagaki's level of skill, it was impossible to be hit when catching someone by surprise.

"No, while listening to the police inspector's story my head started to hurt…"

"You… It seems like you once again need to properly relearn to be respectful to people with a different rank."

After that short spurt of verbal abuse, Toshikazu said "If you are feeling unwell, it's fine to go home" while leaving his side. Lately Toshikazu had seen Inagaki perform that gesture of grasping his head many times. This time, he tried to distract him from it with a joke but Toshikazu truly felt worried for Inagaki.

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That night, there was a fairly intense conversation about the incident on the news with both people in favor of and against Magicians. That was not to say that there was a specific program where both pro-magicians and anti-magicians debated each other. On various channels, fairly heated debates started happening.

Carrying on the tradition of using channels in the analogue broadcasting time period, the famous congressman, Kanda, harshly criticized the way the police handled the situation.

"…The demonstrators did go a bit too far, however, it is clear that the police went too far by haphazardly arresting people. The police officers were equipped with both helmets and shields, and were perfectly prepared to defend themselves. Not a single police officer got hurt in the confrontation with the demonstrators."

"To be fair, one of the police officers in plain clothing received a beating. However, that police officer who did not have anything get broken and only got bruises, retaliated against normal citizens by using magic to attack. That was clearly excessive when taking into account the power of a magician's attack."

"I think that police officers should be even more cautious when using magic than when using guns. I am against the use of magic in all

situations. I plan to propose a bill to the parliament to increase restrictions on the use of magic and the punishment for it. I want Magicians to first ask for the approval of a superior before being allowed to use magic."

During the broadcast of the cable and the internet Culture Communication Television Network, Cal-net, Congressman Ueno, who advocated for the rights of Magicians, calmly answered the casts questions who wanted to remove the rights of magicians.

"Since the beginning, the Magic Universities have been severely restricting outsiders from freely coming and going. They deal with a lot of research for the country and important requests for national defense. They did not respond harshly to the anti-magic doctrine demonstrators."

"The demonstrators did not only swing around metal placards as weapons, but they also threw stones. In that situation, it was likely that not only the students from the Magic University would've gotten hurt, the people passing by as well could have gotten hurt. The police cannot evade the claims of negligence when they left the insurgents from the anti-magic doctrine alone previously."

"Currently there are already strict rules on the use of magic. In this incident, the detectives complied completely with those rules while arresting the perpetrators. On top of that, they had to bind the legs and feet of those people because they interfered with their duty of protecting the safety of citizens. If they had not done that, I think that the citizens could have gotten hurt."

"It has been scientifically proven that completely overpowering people by way of magic is safer than by using gas or a stun gun. It would be a loss for society if the public were to see magic techniques as the enemy. It is merely superstitious."

Kouichi had an expression that looked like a teacher who was grading the exam of an average student while watching the broadcast together with Mayumi.

"Only congressman Ueno seems composed. I wondered if he would bring up any more extreme claims."

While being forced to watch the broadcast together, Mayumi responded with a murmur without trying to hide her displeasure.

"Do you think that Ueno-sensei's argument is bad?"

Kouichi turned an amused look to his eldest daughter, Mayumi, through his lightly tinted glasses.

"Congressman Kanda is a clown, however, it seems like it's become more common for the audience to take such exaggerated speakers more seriously. It is the mark of a childish and idiotic know-it-all to decide things from an emotional speech, but the general public conveniently stops thinking and joins in on the surge of emotions. It is a shrewd method, but I think that person can easily deal with the situation."

"I also think that Ueno-sensei is playing the crowd in a rather lackluster way."

"He is expected to cool things down, not rile people up. Both parties should try to calm the situation."

Mayumi frowned after hearing the words of her father who normally did not say anything bad about people.

"What should we do now, father?"

"First, we observe. It was unexpected of Cal-net to be on our side, however, let's see if they call out that actress this time."

"That actress? Could it be you are talking about Sawamura Maki-san?"

Mayumi hadn't heard that her father knew who was backing that performer. Speaking of that prominent actress, it had not occurred to her that Sawamura Maki had visited this house last year in April.

"Yes. I know about her."

"I don't really know a lot about her… So, why see if they call out Sawamura Maki-san?"

"She is the daughter of the Culture Communication Network's chairman."

"Ah, so it is like that."

Mayumi responded in a relatively sweet tone to the revelation of her father.

After having watched the same broadcast with the politicians' performances, Takuma called up Maki.

"Oh, Takuma. Is something the matter?"

Maki seemingly sounded like she had been surprised by the sudden call. If it had been the Takuma from a year ago, he would've probably said something like "Don't play dumb with me" in an unhappy voice. However, even if those were still his real feelings, he seemed to be able to hide them now.

"Sorry for calling at this hour. I wanted to give you my thanks."

"Your thanks?"

While hearing the doubt in her voice, Takuma was able to hear some slight noises in the background.

"If you are in the middle of work right now…"

"I'm in between photoshoots so I don't mind. So what is it?"

Even though Maki was laughing Takuma did not want to trouble her, so he kept it short.

"Congressman Ueno was on your cable network. The host also seemed quite favorable to Magicians. Was that your doing? I'm honestly thankful."

"What for something like that?"

Maki let out a disappointed laughing voice.

"It is true that I advised my father to not take an anti-magic stance, but that wasn't just because of your request, you know. There have been some new developments, and if you don't keep up with them, you could lose profits. Father is an entrepreneur so he just made some calculations. We also did a favor for Ueno-sensei so you really don't need to thank me.

"You still helped me out, I'm truly grateful."

"Is that so? If that's the case, then I look forward to you returning the favor."

"Ah, you can ask me anything."

Takuma apologized once more for bothering her during work before hanging up.

◊ ◊ ◊

It might be obvious, but a lot of people were also unhappy because the mass media didn't take a one-sided stance on anti-magicians.

The fugitive, Gu Jie wasn't only unhappy, but he was also impatient.

The main goal for his act of terrorism was to entangle the Ten Master Clans and the citizens, changing the public's opinion so that Magicians would be seen as enemies. Gu Jie also predicted that the Japanese magicians who got cornered by this change in public opinion would evade criticism by using the Ten Master Clans as a scapegoat. His plan was to then use the Ten Master Clans to remove the Yotsuba Family from society.

Dividing the Magicians was certainly effective in creating an opening against the Ten Master Clans, but at the moment, Gu Jie realized that things would quiet down before anything could happen.

"Like this, there is no meaning to it. It is not over until I make those people who have stolen my revenge from me suffer like I did."

43 years earlier, Gu Jie was driven out of his homeland by a single failure. He, who held great power and fame for an Ancient Magician, lost everything in a short time and got erased socially.

In the middle of his heart being torn by humiliation, Gu Jie swore that he would take revenge.

He wanted to thrust the Magicians of the Kunlunfang Institute era who exiled him into the same wretched circumstances that he experienced and laugh at their grief and resentment.

He couldn't think of another way to avenge himself.

However, enacting his revenge became impossible. The people whom he wanted to take revenge on were crushed by the Yotsuba.

Having lost the target of his vengeance, having his opportunity stolen, he turned to those responsible.

To banish the Yotsuba from society just like he once was.

"——I won't kill them. I don't want to kill them. It would be best if they lived miserably crawling through the mud."

The suicide bombing attack was the final plan for that purpose.

To deny the usefulness and contribution from the Yotsuba, the Ten Master Clans and all of the Japanese Magicians, to steal their status, their honor and pride from that place.

After he could witness that pitiful sight, he would only want to find a quiet place to die. However, if that plan failed, he wouldn't concoct another plan. He did not plan to rot while he was bringing his revenge to fruition.

At any rate, he needed to get out of this country at once. He did not have the time to slowly plan for his next attack. Gu Jie was aware that he only had a small amount of time left.

The reason why Gu Jie could continue to escape was thanks to the many connections that Zhou Gongjin, who lived all over the place, had prepared.

Not being able to quickly use Hliðskjálf was a serious wound, however, Gu Jie had always thought that it was dangerous to rely heavily on that tool. He should rely more on his blood companion than that unidentified tool. He reaffirmed that belief yet again.

Time was ticking so he wouldn't spend time erasing his tracks, and for the purpose of leaving the country as fast as possible, he needed strong pawns under his own control. It wouldn't do if their potential wasn't higher than the reinforced magicians he had stolen from the Japanese army.

Gu Jie then remembered that his familiar had carved a seal on a pupil from a magic clan with high potential.

‘The person's character wasn't an issue, and it seems like it would be fine if that person from that clan became my puppet'.

By using that pupil as bait, he could fish for his teacher. Gu Jie continued working out his plan.

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Saturday, February 16th. The anti-Magic Association held another demonstration today. However, this time, the target wasn't the Magic University. Their course was heading from the central government agencies to the National Parliament. Unlike yesterday, no one turned violent.

However, that didn't mean that they did not cause any trouble. There was an incident 400 kilometers west of Tokyo that occurred at Second High in Nishinomiya. Two high schoolers were attacked by anti-Magicians on their way back from school.

"Onii-sama?"

"Tatsuya-san?"

Having heard of the incident, Tatsuya returned to First High and was greeted by the surprised voices of Miyuki and Honoka.

"I came back after hearing about the incident at Second High."

Tatsuya dispelled their questions in a single sentence.

"What are the details of the incident?"

And, moreover, returned a single question.

"The female students were attacked by hoodlums on the way back from school, however, they were safe thanks to other students rushing over to help them. Merely by being repelled, the hoodlums were fairly severely wounded because the students mistook the strength of their magic. By the way, Minami-chan is connecting to the audio conference channel of Second High."

Just as Miyuki finished her explanation to Tatsuya, Minami reported that she had connected to the line of the president.

Nodding to Minami, Miyuki talked into the microphone.

"First High Student Council President, Shiba Miyuki, here. Second High, can you hear me?"

"Second High Student Council Vice-President, Kudou Minoru, here. I can hear you loud and clear."

The voice that responded through the speakers belonged to the person with whom they performed a joint operation with last fall at Nara, Kyoto.

"Minoru-kun, you became Second High's Vice-President, right?"

"Yes, surprisingly, it seems like I became the Vice-President. By the way Miyuki-san, won't you switch your video connection on?"

"Eh, I don't mind."

It was good manners to not start a video meeting from the start. It speaks for itself that suddenly connecting to a camera on the corner of a terminal could sometimes be embarrassing.

Before long the conversation was switched to video after initially having connected by voice. After less than a second, Minoru's face was reflected on the large screen inside the Student Council Room.

The sound of people taking deep breaths could be heard around the room many times.

The members who did not go on the preliminary inspection or went to the thesis competition saw Minoru's face. Be that as it may, a beautiful face on par with Miyuki's from the opposite sex was enough to overwhelm the girls apart from Miyuki.

Minoru lightly opened his eyes because he was surprised after seeing Tatsuya in the Student Council Room of First High. Minoru had heard from his family that Tatsuya was assisting in the search for the terrorists. However, he knew that it wouldn't be appropriate to ask him any questions about that now.

"This is sudden, however, Vice-President Kudou."

Since she was talking to the Student Council of another school, Miyuki used her best tone of voice to ask a question.

"Could you tell me the details of the attack that happened to one of your school's students?"

"Certainly, President Shiba."

Minoru also responded in a tone of voice fitting for the Vice-President of Second High.

"About an hour before now on the way from our school to the station, first-year female students from this school got surrounded by 6 men who appeared to be around 20 years old."

Having heard that story, the members of the Student Council, the Chairman of the Public Morals Committee, as well as a female member

from the Public Morals Committee all knitted their brows at the same time.

"The men started preaching ‘Humanism' doctrine to the girls in a loud voice. ‘Only God is allowed to perform acts of miracles, everything that twists the established natural providence of God is an act of the Devil. Humans must live merely by the power that has been given to them' they proclaimed."

Thus, hearing the claims of the religious assailants, it became clear that they were a cult that distorted the ideology of existing religions.

The students repeatedly and firmly asked them to step aside, however, the men did not release them from their encirclement. The students used the crime prevention buzzer on their portable terminal and one of the men then proceeded to try and confiscate her terminal. The situation then turned into a scuffle.

The functionality of the crime prevention buzzer included in the portable terminal is not only limited to letting out a loud sound. It also had the functionality to call the emergency number along with information about their location. It was easy to understand the reason why the men tried to obstruct the use of the buzzer.

"Having heard the disturbance, other students came running over. Three first-year students and one second-year student. The second-year student pushed his way through the wall created by the assailants, and the first-year students followed through the gap he created, then they got into a brawl with the cult followers. Their opponents were larger and on top of that, it seems like they also knew Chinese martial arts. At the moment that the second year student got knocked down, the girls from the first year finished their magic and made the cult followers powerless."

"How were the injuries?"

"The second-year student's nose was broken, his eardrum got ruptured, his ribs got cracked and he had internal bleeding in various places in his body. There was also damage to his internal organs, it seems like a fairly serious injury. One male first year student broke his collarbone and

another one got a concussion. It seems like he took a blow to the back of his head. No other male or female student seems to have any other injury that stood out."

"How about their opponents?"

"The magic used was ‘Spark' and ‘Press'. One person's pulse became irregular because the effect of ‘Spark', while another person fell down, hit his head and cut the inside of his mouth, so it seems like he also broke a tooth. The rest got some bruises and scratches from being pushed down by ‘Press'."

"I heard that the side of the criminals bore serious injuries, however, but isn't the second year student the one with more serious injuries?"

Minoru showed a slightly bitter smile because of Miyuki's remark. —— He regained his composure and the bitterness disappeared from his smile.

"The irregular pulse right after having received the magic attack seemed quite severe… Even though I know that some people's blood pressures easily become irregular, the degree of the damage caused by the electrical attack was unknown before investigating. I think that turned into the story of ‘A severe injury'."

The reaction of the First High students was separated in those who felt relief and those who let out a bitter smile.

Incidentally, Miyuki was in the group who felt relief and Tatsuya in the group that let out a bitter smile.

"If that is the case, it does not seem like the first year students went too far in their self-defense, right?"

"Now the President and one of the Vice-Presidents are going to the police together with a teacher. I can't confirm if they know if they will return but it probably shouldn't be a problem right?"

"Is that so. Well then, could you please inform me of the result when the president comes back? Just sending an email is enough."

"Understood. I will inform you by email."

"Please do, Vice-President Kudou."

"Yes, certainly. Well then President Shiba, no, Miyuki-san. I'll be taking my leave."

"Yes. Farewell Minoru-kun."

Cutting of the television meeting switch, Miyuki turned her head towards Tatsuya.

"Onii-sama, it is as you heard. Like Minoru-kun said, it seems like using magic for self-defense is still a delicate subject."

"Even if it's not deemed to be a crime this time, the problem of whether it's appropriate or not still remains, right? There is no clear standard yet for the degree of magic use that is allowed for varying degrees of danger. Worst case scenario, the use of magic could be altogether forbidden by a judge."

"Shiba-senpai, isn't that too unreasonable? If such a ruling were to happen, wouldn't that mean that in the end, magicians don't even have the right to defend themselves?"

Izumi rebutted after Tatsuya's pessimistic prediction.

"It would be fine to use methods of self-defense not involving magic."

However, when Shizuku presented her hypothesis, Izumi was not able to make a new objection.

Having heard the answers of Minoru, the regular meeting came to a close. After returning home, Tatsuya sat down at the dining table.

"Seeing how much damage was done to both sides, will they realize it was a legitimate case of self-defense?"

"Yes… it's not clear yet. I feel like Onii-sama's prediction from earlier really hit the mark."

Tatsuya and Miyuki both had the same worry. Finding the right criteria to set limits on Magician could lead to a judge outright forbidding the use of magic for self-defense, purely based on his ideological standpoint.

"…I think it would require some time to request clearly written rules about using magic as self-defense through the Magic Association. Assuming that it would be granted."

With regards to existing laws, removing the cases where the use of magic was allowed for the duties of government officials and civilians who acted as agents for official business, it was actually fairly ambiguous. If there was a situation where there was an urgent need for the public good, the interpretation of the wording becomes quite broad.

That is, historically, when magicians have been used as a tool by the government. the government had freely used magic to preserve public order and quell disasters, and thus the regulations were fairly equivocal.

However, this time, it would become clear if it was insufficient to protect a single magician.

If Magicians hadn't become a tool for the country, chaos could have very well taken hold by this juncture.

"It is not certain that First High's students won't be targeted. Minami."

"Yes, Tatsuya-sama."

Minami who stood in the kitchen entered the dining room after Tatsuya called out to her.

"Minami, when I'm not close to Miyuki, try to do as many things together with her, if possible. Try to not leave her side even more than you have been before."

"Yes."

"From now on, try not to receive any magical attacks and don't use any magic that would injure your opponents. Also avoid ‘Reflection'."

"However, Tatsuya-sama. Even ‘Isolation' reflects the strength of an attack to the original caster. Using it together with ‘Deceleration' with

my amount of magic power will lower the duration of my shield remarkably."

Alongside Minami's objection, Miyuki came to help.

"Onii-sama. What if I take charge of ‘Deceleration'?"

However, Tatsuya's reaction was not positive.

"No… In that situation your magic power would erode Minami's shield. You would also be splitting your concentration between the control of my seal. In that situation, small adjustments would be difficult right?"

"That is… I don't deny that"

Miyuki responded disappointedly.

"Anyways, being the next Head of the Yotsuba Family, it would be bad if you used magic on civilians. Leave everything to Minami."

Watching Miyuki nod, Tatsuya returned his gaze to Minami.

"If a situation occurs where it seems that Miyuki will be attacked, wherever you are, I will come dashing over as fast as I can. Therefore, just try and hold out until I get there."

"Understood. I will leave it to you, Tatsuya-sama."

Honestly speaking, the difficulty of Tatsuya's request was fairly high. However, above maid work, the protection of Miyuki was more important.

Minami nodded resolutely to Tatsuya.

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——Despite it finally being Sunday, I had to meet that annoying guy in the morning——

Thought Erika as she returned from her long run. Just then, her older brother, Toshikazu, was going out and she met him by the gate.

It did not seem like Toshikazu was going out to play. He was in his work clothes, a coat and a suit. However, Erika did not think this was suspicious. It was not an exaggeration to say that the work of a detective didn't stop on a Sunday. Or, at least, the detectives affiliated with the Chiba Family all felt that way.

Without saying anything or looking at him, she tried to sneak past him.

"Erika."

Nevertheless, she was still stopped just as she had anticipated.

Erika didn't like this brother who was from another mother. And, thus, wasn't also good at dealing with her father.

She still remembered being knocked down time and time again until she couldn't stand up again from her childhood during practice.

She got irritated remembering the various times where she got ridiculed in a joking voice. It was frustrating to her that his words accurately revealed the hidden thoughts in her heart.

Wishing it wasn't such a thorn in her heart, Erika wondered what he needed from her. Since becoming a high school student, she had abandoned trying to reconcile things.

"What is it?"

The most Erika could do was to look at him with a pouting face.

"There's something I want you to listen to."

However, the usual sarcasm didn't come.

"So, what is it?"

She still thought her tone of voice was angry but her pouting face disappeared while she answered the question.

Toshikazu was not concerned by Erika's rebellious attitude. He felt like he didn't have the time to mind because it was different every time.

"You haven't seen Inagaki?"

"Inagaki-san?"

Because of the unexpected question, Erika unintentionally thought about it seriously.

"…I haven't seen him lately. What timeframe are you looking for?"

"From yesterday to now."

"Yesterday?"

Erika frowned because she didn't understand Toshikazu's intention. Is there a reason to worry about a healthy adult who hasn't shown up for a day?

Toshikazu averted his gaze after Erika turned to him with a strange look, sensing his discomfort.

"After that guy took the day off yesterday I haven't been able to contact him."

Having sensed the need for an excuse, he explained uncomfortably while turning away.

"Inagaki lives alone right? Couldn't he have suddenly fallen ill?"

"He also isn't at home. Where on earth could he be loitering around…"

"…You even went over to his house."

Toshikazu turned his back to Erika's quip.

"A-Anyways! If you see Inagaki contact me, as soon as possible and also inform my colleagues."

Colleagues, that is to say, the students of the Chiba doujou.

Toshikazu quickly left Erika behind as she mumbled "Well, that fine but…" After a little while, Erika had taken a shower and finished eating dinner, then she entered the dojo.

Neither her father nor older sister were inside. Erika had aimed for this opportunity to train without them in the dojo. The sisters had a different mother and a bad relationship, living perfectly isolated from each other even within the Chiba Family.

Even though it was Sunday morning, there were a lot of students practicing. In the center, were young men in their twenties. Veterans from the same generation as Inagaki could also be seen.

Having suddenly remembered her talk with Toshikazu, Erika went closer to them to have them listen to the story.

"Naitou-san, Kadota-san, do you have a minute?"

Erika asked the two while one was swinging a wooden sword and the other was giving advice.

"Oh, Erika-san, good morning."

"Ah, you came Erika-san."

Having heard her call out, the two people stopped practice swinging and looked at Erika.

"So why I called out to you… the two of you both joined around the same time as Inagaki-san, right?"

"Yeah."

"Although, Inagaki-san is still a bit older."

"That doesn't change anything, right."

After Erika emphasized an age difference of only two years, Kadota gave her a cold look.

However quickly realizing she was not making any progress, she changed her mind.

"Well then, it seems like Inagaki-san has been missing since yesterday, so have you two heard anything?"

"Missing?"

Naitou who was the same age as Inagaki and probably the closest to Inagaki in the dojo, frowned his eyebrows in doubt.

"Hmm, that's weird. From his character I wouldn't think that there would be a task so urgent that he wouldn't even leave a message behind."

"Inagaki-san isn't as methodical as Naitou-san."

with a thump, a fairly harsh sound resounded from Kadota's head.

"…Stop joking around."

"I am just glad I didn't get hit by the wooden sword."

"Yeah, yeah, leave the playfulness out of this."

Erika turned unamused eyes to Kadota who, in spite of getting hit on the head by a fairly powerful strike from Naitou's fist, didn't show a lot of pain.

"So, the both of you don't know anything right?"

"We don't. …Attention!"

After Naitou turned his head that looked towards Erika he yelled towards the center of the doujou in a loud voice.

"Raise your hand if you have seen Inagaki today or yesterday!"

No one lifted their hand.

"No one knows where Inagaki is!?"

This time, two young men passed twenty lifted their hands.

"I haven't seen him yesterday, however, the day before yesterday I saw him around my home town."

After he said that, other people nodded as well.

"You guys live in Kamakura right?"

"Yeah."

"It seemed like he was looking for something. I thought he was doing an investigation so I didn't call out to him."

"You didn't notice anything else?"

"I only glanced at him… Sorry."

Naitou turned to Erika.

Erika returned a nod to Naitou.

"Got it. Resume practice!"

Removing his gaze from the students who resumed practice and simultaneously yelled out "Yes!", Naitou turned his body back towards Erika.

"It is as you have heard. My apologies that we weren't of much use."

"You don't need to apologize to me. Originally, it was brother's task. Naitou, please confer the contents of this conversation to my brother."

Saying that, Erika left Naitou and Kadota.

Knowing very well that Erika had trouble dealing with her brother, Toshikazu, Naitou agreed with a smile.

Having been contacted by Naitou, Toshikazu got into his undercover patrol car without even entering the temporary investigation headquarters.

He called out Kamakura and flashed his lights.

While at the same time, his feeling of regret slowly rose.

The house of the Ancient magician who explained corpse control magic that they went to together was in Kamakura.

Just before that, Toshikazu received a warning from Fujibayashi. That Ancient magician was a person under surveillance of the Magic Association. It was rumored that he was friends with former magicians from Dahan.

There were signs as well. After hearing that Magician's story, Inagaki had unnaturally held his head many times.

I fear that the Magician, ‘Doll Maker,' used an Oumi Kazukiyo technique. It was probably a type of mind control magic.

Why did I fail to notice the symptoms that Fujibayashi had told me about in Inagaki?

Toshikazu tried to resist the impulse to verbally abuse himself by biting hard on his teeth but some sound still escaped from his mouth.

Toshikazu stopped his undercover patrol car one block from the ‘Doll Maker' Magician's residence and erased his presence before going to the front of the building.

It was not to the degree of Ono Haruka, the counselor of First High with the nickname "Phantom," however, Toshikazu's hiding technique was also first class. It was an easy feat to fool the passerby's while holding a sword cane in his hand. He could not deceive machines, however, if it were fellow humans, he had complete confidence that he could easily stay hidden.

While Toshikazu was erasing his presence, he extended his perception beyond his five senses to the inside of the residence. His magic didn't

cover the target like a cloth, but acted more like countless threads radiating and extending from him.

Against his expectations, there was nothing hindering him. There was no isolation wall to cut off the thread nor was there a special lineage trap that would take advantage of the threads to counterattack. Nevertheless, he continued searching deeper inside the residence without becoming careless.

He quickly found the presence of Inagaki.

Toshikazu remembered to be more careful because it went a bit too easily.

However, he soon pushed away that worry from the corners of his consciousness.

The presence of Inagaki that returned from the thread seemed like he was on the brink of death, and terribly weak. Even when not eating or drinking anything for a full day, he seemed to have weakened way too much. It seemed like it would be a race against time.

There was no time to be worried. Toshikazu instantly abandoned regular procedures.

——Even if he was mistaken, he would just write his letter of resignation——

Becoming serious, Toshikazu decided to enter the residence.

To start with, he peacefully rang the intercom. He couldn't simply meekly open the door, but he was thinking of a pretext to break the lock. Toshikazu was getting riled up to do that however,

"Ow, the police officer from a few days ago? I opened it with my key, come in."

Suddenly hearing that reply, he prepared to dodge any questions.

Even though he his sense of foreboding was increasing, he told himself "Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained" and turned the door knob.

The door wasn't locked.

Toshikazu walked into the entry hall and the hall got illuminated automatically. Nowadays, a gimmick like that wasn't that unusual because most houses didn't have windows anymore. Furthermore, it was now the second time that he came here. Toshikazu put on shoes (that were also in the house's style) and went further down the corridor.

There was an old man wearing a costume with a long stand-up collar waiting for him inside the corridor. From his appearance, you would guess his age to be between 50 years old and 60 years old. His hair was pure white, however his skin was dark with many wrinkles and cracks, however, he did not seem to have any liver spots. From the color of his skin and his looks, it seemed like he originally came from the peninsula of Indochina, thought Toshikazu. In any case, he didn't look like he was Oumi Kazukiyo.

"Oumi-sensei is out right now, however, he said to let any police agent straight through."

Said the older person in Japanese while lowering his head. Toshikazu felt like the older person had an English accent.

"Excuse me, who are you?"

Toshikazu was aware of the fact that he asked the question in a fervent manner.

"I am called Guen, an old friend of Oumi-sensei."

As expected, thought Toshikazu, he seems to be from Vietnam. Provided that it was not a fake name.

"An acquaintance of yours is here."

"Are you talking about Inagaki?"

Even though he lost his fervor, he did not let his guard down. Toshikazu continued questioning the old man who called himself ‘Guen' while warning himself to not let lose his wariness.

"Inagaki-san. Oh, right. Oumi-sensei told me about him."

The old man answered Toshikazu while having his back turned to him and leading the way.

The old man opened the door to the room.

The figure of Inagaki laying down came flying into Toshikazu's vision. On top of the bed, weakly, painfully breathing.

"Inagaki!"

Toshikazu's dashed into the room. Instantly realizing that this put the old man behind him he stopped.

The old man didn't seem to notice the unnatural behavior of Toshikazu and continued walking towards the side of the bed where Inagaki was sleeping.

Toshikazu made sure he could see both the old man and Inagaki before walking closer.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Toshikazu asked another question while suppressing the anger in his voice and looking down upon the face of the old man.

"Your friend has received a curse."

"A curse?"

"My apologies. Someone is stealing his life force by using a curse technique."

"A curse technique you say…?"

Toshikazu was bewildered, however, that was not that surprising. Toshikazu thought Inagaki had received a magic attack from a ‘Doll Maker'.

But it seems like in this situation, the ‘Doll Maker' was giving medical treatment to Inagaki.

"Oumi-sensei found your friend collapsed and brought him to this residence to perform emergency treatment and alleviate the effects of the

curse. Due to that, he couldn't contact you. The telephone line has also become an avenue of attack for curses."

For the time being, he had a feeling that the old man's words made sense. However, that was not proof that he spoke the truth. Toshikazu did not hear any inconsistencies.

But it was hard to take a hostile attitude here and be rough to him. Toshikazu thought about returning to his car so he could call for reinforcements.

However, he wasn't able to do that.

"Police inspector…"

He was stopped by the weak call of Inagaki.

"Inagaki, you are awake!"

Toshikazu unintentionally put his left hand on top of the bed's frame. However his right hand was still free so he could be careful of the old man behind him.

Inagaki's right hand lightly grasped Toshikazu's left hand.

However in the next moment, Inagaki's hand grasped Toshikazu's wrist with the strength of a vice.

Toshikazu tried to repress his surprise.

The strength was incredible. For having been so weak up until now —— when it looked like he could be mistaken for a deceased person, he was able to put out this amount of strength.

Inagaki's left hand jumped out from under the futon. In that hand was something that looked like a syringe.

Toshikazu used his right hand to defend against Inagaki's left hand reflexively.

Right after that, Toshikazu felt a shock on his back with the strength of a stun gun. Not having the strength to turn around, his consciousness fell into the darkness.

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The magicians spearheaded by the Ten Master Clans deployed their full strength to find the ringleader of the act of terror in Hakone, and the police were also investigating the whereabouts of the terrorists. However, it had already been two weeks since the terror incident and the date had changed to February 18th, yet they still had not been able to find the whereabouts of Gu Jie.

They hadn't been able to find new clues from the dead bodies of the generators obtained in Zama. While the feeling of getting stuck in a stalemate in the investigation started to float around, Tatsuya started to investigate the location of Gu Jie once again.

However, Tatsuya suddenly got a feeling of impending danger while on the way to Kamakura alone on his motorcycle. You might be able to say that he was a guy who could feel it in his bones. Stopping his bike and focusing his eyes on the deep snow, he wasn't able to find that which had given him that feeling of danger. There was no skill to look into the future.

Nevertheless, following his feeling of uneasiness he turned his bike towards Hachiouji.

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There was still a lot of time to go before the school day ended, however, Miyuki went to the front of the nearest station from First High.

"Miyuki-sama, I'm incredibly sorry."

Minami, who was walking next to her, frequently apologized.

"Haven't I told you many times that it's fine? This is also Student Council work so I don't have any intention to force it on Minami-chan and the others."

"But even so, Miyuki-senpai, is it really okay for it to be just us."

Superficially, it seemed like Izumi was apologizing as well, however, she was not able to hide her real intentions.

Miyuki went out along with Izumi and Minami to purchase souvenirs to give to the graduated students. Every year, the souvenirs are ordered from a shop in front of the station. At last year's appointment Miyuki went alone, but this year going alone wasn't enough so she brought along two other people.

"Excuse me. We are the members of First High's Student Council."

"Yes, please come in."

The person who came out to receive them from within the shop wasn't the shopkeeper, but his wife.

The shop's side had also learned various things from last year's negotiations.

"It took quite some time, didn't it, Miyuki-senpai?"

Having just left the shop, Izumi let out a complaint in a small voice. Some way or another, a fed up atmosphere drifted around after hearing the complaint coming from an elegant voice.

"Right. However, today's plans had already roughly been decided so we did our best."

Miyuki consoled with a smiling face.

"That's right, Miyuki-senpai, you negotiated wonderfully. As expected of Miyuki-senpai."

Izumi instantly lifted away the tension.

"It's not like I think it was to be expected…"

"No, being able to settle that conversation that fast was all thanks to Miyuki's strength."

Turning her back on her integrity by having just earlier said that it took quite some time and then saying to Miyuki "that she did it that fast" was Izumi's default. Of course, attached was the intention to maximize the time she spent with Miyuki.

"Still, it's wonderful to be that modest."

Up until now, it had mainly been one person that praised Miyuki.

Miyuki was experienced in ignoring Izumi's excitement with a smile.

Leaving that aside, the school day would come to an end before long. Girls generally walked around with various small makeup items so it wasn't like they left school empty-handed, but It was still necessary to temporarily return to school before going back home.

"Well then, let's quickly go back to school. It isn't like we will only barely make it, but we don't have that much time left over."

"That's right."

"Yes."

After hearing Miyuki's remark, both Izumi and Minami nodded in turn and the three of them turned their feet towards First High.

However, after only having walked for 10 minutes the girls had to stop.

In a side street horizontal from the main street that students took to go to and from school, they encountered a group of around 10 men.

Through the cracks of the circle they stood in, they were able to see the boots that First High female students wore.

"What are you guys doing!"

Izumi, who quickly noticed the female students inside the group of people, quickly walked closer and questioned them in a loud voice.

Some people who stood next to the group of people turned around to face her. The men started talking amongst themselves "Hey, that's the one from the Saegusa Family", "Do you know that the one behind her she is First High's Student Council President". Their voices reached both Miyuki's and Izumi's ears.

"Izumi-chan, wait."

Miyuki, who quickly caught up to Izumi, stopped her by grabbing her arm.

However, Miyuki's restraint had been too late.

No, the men's movement had been quick.

Leaving behind the female students that they had been pestering, they crowded around Miyuki's group.

"What is it, who are you guys!?"

The men did not respond to Izumi's normal question.

"That's the ringleader's daughter from the users of those sinful black arts!"

Except in a violent play, Izumi did not expect to have that line thrown at her.

"Repent!"

After that person loudly shouted that, the other men also called out "Repent!" in unison.

"Pardon?"

"Izumi-chan, wait."

Izumi, who started flaring up against the men was stopped by Miyuki.

"Only God is allowed to perform acts of miracles, everything that twists the established natural providence of God is an act of the Devil!"

The men recited the verse that they had learned by ear, however, Miyuki took Izumi's hand and turned back around.

"If you won't open the path."

The men who got glared at by Miyuki showed flinched expressions, however, not responding to Miyuki's words, they once again recited "Repent!" in unison.

"Humans can only use what has been given to humans by God."

Miyuki also did not want to listen to them anymore.

"If you do not move aside, that would be unlawful confinement. Are you fine with that?"

The guy who looked like the leader stopped the verse he was reciting to threaten the youth in front of him.

"Hey, shut up!"

The man next to the one Miyuki had asked that question to yelled at her.

Miyuki did not pay any attention to the man's threat.

"Minami-chan."

"Yes."

Minami gave a short response to Miyuki's call. Minami had already finished preparing a magic barrier composed of both ‘Isolation' and ‘Deceleration' that just barely did not touch the men.

At that moment, the men did not understand what Minami had done.

Miyuki took out her terminal to ring the crime prevention buzzer.

The man who shouted at Miyuki attempted to grab her terminal with his hands. However, his hands were repelled by Minami's wall.

They noticed that they could not reach their hands towards the three girls.

"You think it's good to use magic as you please, do you!"

A voice rose up from the crowd.

"I am merely defending myself against flagrant illegal confinement."

Miyuki answered in a clear voice to the accusation of the shameless person.

"As a woman, I can feel when my body is in danger."

She added in a scornful voice.

Izumi turned to the leader with a cold look.

That look was an unbearable provocation for people who did not doubt their own virtue.

"Punish them!"

The leader lifted his right hand up and forcefully brought it down again.

Including both the people to his left and right, a total of four young men stepped forward, pushing out their right fists in front of them.

On their middle finger was a brass ring that was giving off a dull shine.

"Could that be Antinite!?"

Izumi let out a panicked statement.

"Divine punishment!"

As the leader's order was carried out, Miyuki, Izumi and Minami were attacked by the Cast Jamming noise from the Antinite.

Minami, who was supporting the barrier magic let out a moan.

The shaking wall was surrounded in every direction by the outstretched hands of the men.

(To be Continued in the next volume)

Afterword

The series has already reached its 18th volume. Tatsuya and Miyuki will soon be third-year students. I get the feeling that a lot of goals have become closer. However, lately I am getting more worried that I haven't had enough time to write episodes and have left plot points unfinished. …No, it's probably due to the fact that the finish line is approaching.

First I planned for the arc to have two parts, but this Master Clans Conference Arc has three parts instead. This is because time and time again, I kept thinking, "If I don't write this", "and It would be better if I wrote this as well." For example, in the original plot of this volume, Raymond wasn't going to appear. However, while I was writing about his different standpoint within the "Seven Sages" and how he differs slightly from the other six, I reconsidered my original idea of only hinting at him and decided to touch on him. While writing, the appearances of Fujibayashi Kyouko and Chiba Toshikazu also increased. With these small additions piling up, the number of volumes has increased.

Speaking of getting worried about leaving things unfinished, on the other side of the Steeplechase Arc, the encounter that Erika and Leo had keeps getting pulled to the back of my consciousness all the time. I don't have the intention of writing another side story after this book, but after the Master Clans Conference Arc is over, I think I want to write an extra arc about Leo and Erika.

Even though I say this, it's not something that I can decide at my own discretion. The only thing currently decided, is that Volume 19 will conclude the "Master Clans Conference Arc".

I think that the announcement of wanting to deliver the next volume "Master Clans Conference (III)" will be made as soon as possible, I would appreciate your thanks.

(Satou Tsutomu)

二〇九七年、世界中の魔法師が注目する中、
箱根のホテルで開かれた師族会議は、数々の衝撃的な案件が扱われていた。

一条家次期当主・一条将輝による四葉家次期当主・司波深雪への婚約申し込み、
人間主義者（反魔法師運動を行う過激勢力）への対策強化、
七草家による周公瑾との裏取引への糾弾、そして『九島家の辞退』と『七宝家の加入』……。
互いのパワーバランスを牽制する知謀知略の戦いが繰り広げられ、
過去にない波乱を生んだ師族会議だが、どうにか無事に閉幕を迎えようとしたその刹那、
謎の爆発が会場を襲う。

魔法科高校の劣等生

The irregular at magic high school

佐島勤 Tsutomu Sato
illustration 石田可奈 Kana Ishida

公式ツイッターはこちら！ http://twitter.com/dengeki_mahouka

電撃文庫

死体を操る魔法で自爆テロを敢行させるという、
この残酷な計画を企てた黒幕である顧傑（グ・ジー）は、気配を消して日本に潜伏していた。
この自爆テロ事件によって、世論が魔法師を糾弾しはじめ、
人間主義の勢力が勢いづく中、十師族は黒幕の捜査を決める。

克人、真由美、将輝と協力して達也は顧傑の行方を探す。
しかし、手掛かりを掴んだ達也の前に思わぬ敵が立ち塞がる。

その正体は、ＵＳＮＡ軍だった。
米軍最強の魔法師部隊スターズのナンバー・ツー、
ベンジャミン・カノープス少佐も参戦するこの『顧傑』争奪戦は、
思わぬかたちで達也を『激怒』させ……！

七草真由美、十文字克人の捜索、一条将輝の奮闘、そして……。

様々な人間の思惑が揺れ動く中、
顧傑による、『死体を操る魔法』によって、
起こってはならない最悪の事態が巻き起こる――!!

第19巻、師族会議編〈下〉
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